

Biggles

GOES ALONE



**CAPTAIN
W.E. JOHNS**

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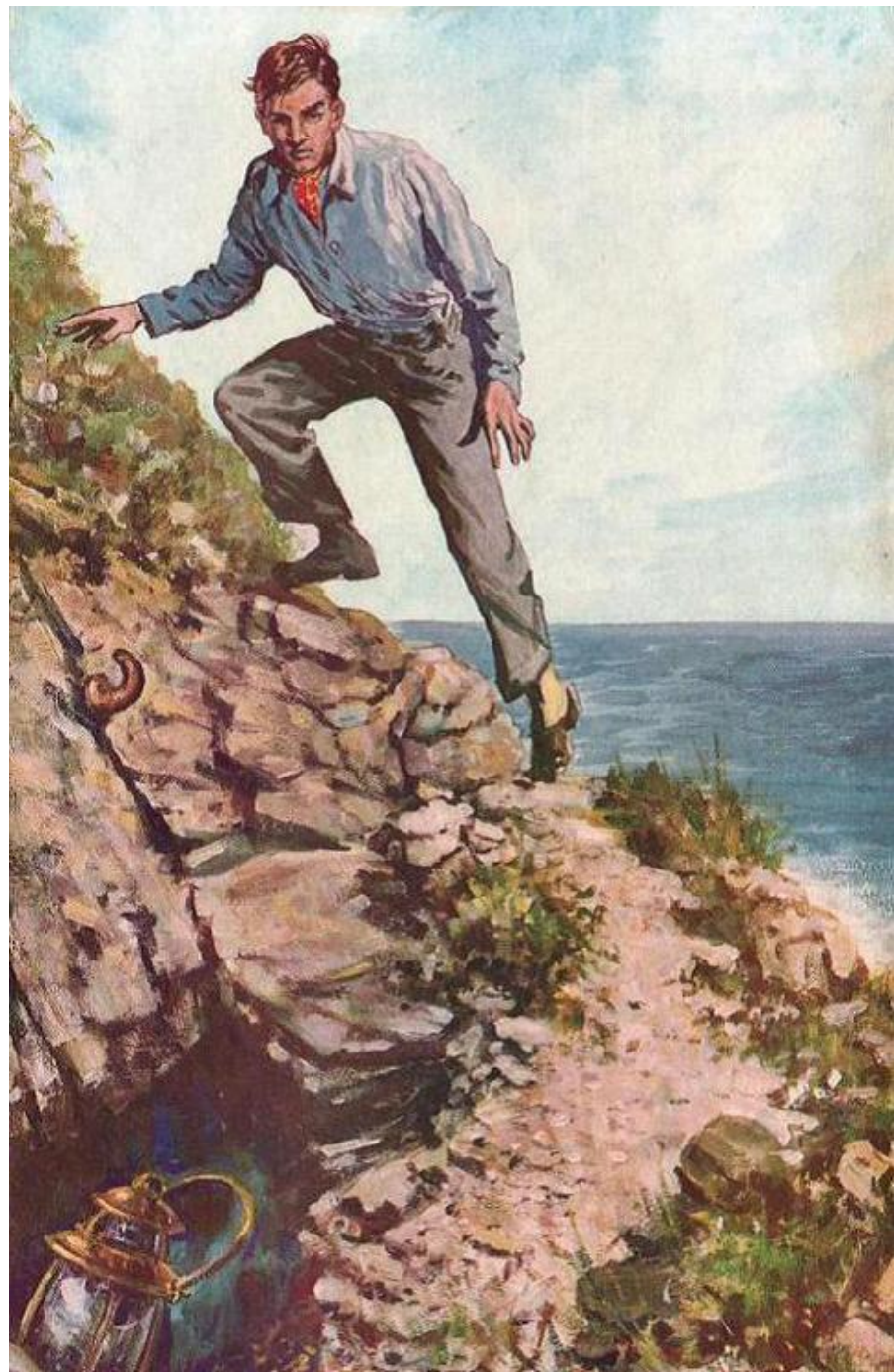
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CHAPTER I

GROUNDED

“You know, Bigglesworth, I think it’s time you had a rest.”

The speaker was Air Commodore Raymond, head of the Air Police Section at Scotland Yard. His eyes were on the face of his senior operational pilot, and he spoke seriously.

Biggles looked surprised, and a little hurt. “Is that a nice way of inviting me to retire?”

“Oh no, nothing like that,” answered the Air Commodore, quickly.

“Then what’s the matter, sir? Have I slipped up somewhere, or somehow, over something?”

“No, but I’m rather afraid you might unless you lay off and relax for a while. You’ve been working at high pressure for years, at a pace no man can stand indefinitely.”

“But—”

The Air Commodore raised a hand. “I know what I’m talking about; and I know all the arguments you’re going to put forward. Over a period of a good many years I’ve been listening to them, and not only from you. I don’t want you to crack. The suggestion I’ve just made is never welcome. Some fellows take it as questioning their courage or ability, and therefore as a personal affront. But if you’ll look around for some of those who refused to listen to common sense you’ll notice they’re no longer with us.”

Biggles frowned. “That’s a cheerful thought to hand me on a fine summer morning, I must say.”

“It’s true, and you know it. Do you ever look at yourself in a mirror?”

“Unfortunately I have to every morning in order to shave.”

“And what do you see? No—don’t tell me. I can see for myself. It may not have struck you but you’re looking tired, strained. Those shadows under your eyes tell a story that’s easy to read. It’s nothing to be ashamed of. It’s inevitable when a man has logged as many hours in the air as you have. And your flying hasn’t been on a regular run with everything laid on.”

“Thank goodness for that. I wasn’t cut out for a bus driver. For me there was no future in that.”

The Air Commodore’s eyes still rested on Biggles’ face. “Well, what about it?” he asked quietly.

Biggles looked resigned. “Okay, sir, if that’s how you feel. What do you suggest I do with myself?”

“Get yourself off to a nice quiet spot in the country, preferably by the seaside, and take the weight off your feet. Do nothing. Relax. Give your brain a rest and your nerves a chance to slacken. You’ll feel better for it.”

“I feel all right now.”

“That’s what you think because it’s what you want to think; but I know better. Get away from it all. Everything’s quiet at the moment. There’s nothing the others can’t handle. Forget about the office. Should anything important turn up I can always recall you.”

“But—”

“Don’t argue. If you won’t be persuaded I shall have to make it an order. You’ve been running on full revs for too long and it’s up to me to see that you throttle back and give your engine a chance to cool down.”

“May I fly—”

“You’re not doing any flying. You’re not going near an aircraft. You’re grounded until further orders.”

“But I shall go round the bend, doing nothing,” protested Biggles.

“Oh no you won’t. At first you may find it a bit of a bind, but you’ll get over that and wonder why you didn’t think of taking some leave before I had to make you.”

“But I must do something.”

“Try lying by the sea watching the waves roll in. When you get tired of counting them close your eyes and let them lull you to sleep. There’s no better medicine. When you fed you need a little exercise, as a change from chasing crooks round the world try hunting shrimps among the rocks. They’re nearly as hard to catch.”

Biggles smiled wanly and reached for a cigarette. “As you say, sir. I have a weakness for shrimps but I seldom get time to peel their little hides off.”

“You’ll have time now. Incidentally, you’re smoking too much. With a stiff sea breeze blowing in your face you won’t get through half as many cigarettes. That, too, will be all to the good.”

“It’ll be a queer sensation to have nothing to think about. Where can I go where I shan’t be pestered by people trying to sell me ice cream and lollipops?”

“I’ve the answer all ready. I can put you on the ideal spot. It’s a cosy little pub, right off the beaten track, on the South Cornish coast. The food is excellent; the service first class and the beds comfortable. All you’ll need will be your small kit, a swim suit, a pair of flannel bags, a couple of shirts and a light raincoat.”

Biggles nodded. “I see you’ve got it all worked out, sir. Is this the place you dash off to from time to time?”

“The same. It’s called the Southview Hotel. It stands with its feet practically in the sea near a hamlet by the name of Polstow. The nearest railway is fifteen miles away so you’ll need your car. The place is run, very efficiently, by a Major Payne and his wife. A charming couple. You’ll like them. They know me well I’ll call them on the phone and let them know you’re on your way. They’ll make you comfortable. You can do anything you like within reason. The radio is in a separate room so you won’t be worried by that if you don’t want to hear it.”

Biggles drew a deep breath. "Fair enough, sir. If it's good enough for you it should be good enough for me. I'll put few things in s suitcase and press on."

"Send me a postcard to let me know how you're doing."

Biggles got up. "Of course. I wouldn't be likely to forget a thing like that. Everyone sends postcards from the seaside."

Which explains, briefly, why the following day found Biggles sitting on a boulder with his feet in the sea near the village of Polstow, in Cornwall, watching the tide recede from a snug little cove to expose a curving stretch of glistening sand and seaweed-festooned rocks.

He had not yet begun to count the waves. He was wondering how long his nerves would stand the strain of enforced inaction without snapping.



*... the following day found Biggles sitting on a boulder
with his feet in the sea ...*

CHAPTER II

THE QUIET LIFE

Biggles had found all the Air Commodore had said about the hotel more than justified. The food and service were good, and while it would not have claimed to be in the luxury class it had an ambience that raised it above the level of an ordinary country pub.

He had been there for a fortnight, doing nothing but laze about, when the calm serenity of the village was shattered by an event which, while it did not directly concern him, had the effect of creating an atmosphere from which, in so small a place, he found it difficult to disassociate himself.

The first few days of doing literally nothing had been an even greater strain than he had expected; but the phase had passed, and from then on, as the Air Commodore had predicted, as his nerves relaxed under the influence of rest, good food and fresh sea air, he more easily adjusted himself to the unusual experience of going to bed and getting up in the morning with nothing on his mind.

He had found Major Payne, a retired army officer in the late fifties, cordial and hospitable. His wife, a cheerful, good-looking woman rather younger than her husband, was charming to everyone as she went about her work of running the hotel. He had got to know them well and liked them both.



Major Payne

There were ten bedrooms, which set a limit to the number of guests. Most of these were people on short holidays and they usually came and went without Biggles even knowing their names. There were, however, four permanent residents. They had been staying at the hotel for more than a year, and with these he had had a certain amount of conversation.

The first was an old merchant navy captain, a widower named Gower. He was one of the bluff, breezy type, with definite views on almost everything. His chief occupation was reading "thrillers", and he boasted that he read one a day. Garrulous and self-opinionated, he was not the man Biggles would have chosen for a constant companion. Critical of criticism, as are most critics, in argument he could be intolerant, even truculent; but he was really a simple man and there was nothing to dislike about him. In expressing his opinions he said what he thought, and in this respect he was at least sincere. He had been all over the world so he and Biggles had at least one thing in common.

The other three were a family, a Mr. Graveson, his wife, and their nineteen year old son, Paul. There was nothing remarkable about any of them. Mr. Graveson was an oil prospector whose health had broken down from long service in the Middle East and was now living on a pension provided by the company for which he had worked. A semi-invalid, his conversation was

confined almost entirely to the one subject with which he was familiar—oil; which interested Biggles not at all. His wife was a dour, stoutish lady of a certain age who spent most of her time knitting socks and pullovers for her son.

Biggles had tried to make contact with this young man but had failed. An anaemic, unsociable, neurotic-looking sort of lad, he made it clear that he preferred to be left alone. He had obviously been thoroughly spoiled, and still was. It pained Biggles to hear the offhand way he spoke to his parents. Captain Gower had something to say about that, of course. “What he needs,” he would growl, “is a thundering good hiding. A year or two before the mast, as I had it in my young days, would knock some of the nonsense out of him.”

“I wouldn’t be too hard on him,” protested Biggles. “Saudi Arabia is no place for a kid to be brought up. Payne tells me he’s never been to school. That’s always a handicap. All he knows came from a private tutor or his mother; and a temperature of a hundred and twenty in the shade isn’t an ideal condition in which to learn anything. Aside from all that, you and I, who were born in a different generation, find it hard to keep pace with the modern trend. Discipline isn’t what it used to be.”

“You talk as if you were sorry for him.”

“In a way I am. Anyhow, it isn’t for us to criticize.”

The object of Captain Gower’s wrath either dashed about the countryside in a red sports car his doting parents had just bought him or went off alone with a butterfly net and satchel. His hobby was said to be entomology, but as Biggles had no more interest in butterflies than he had in oil he did not bother to join him on his expeditions.

Occasionally, after taking her for a run in his car, Paul brought in a girl who lived in the village and was actually a friend of the Paynes, who had introduced them. Her name was Vera Harrington. A vivacious brunette with a ready smile, quick-witted, always well dressed and neatly groomed, she was undeniably attractive, so it was easy to understand why Paul was obviously more than a little interested in her. According to Gower she had for a time worked in London as a model, but having decided she preferred a country life she had returned to her mother, who had a house in the village and at that time was still alive. Biggles knew her well by sight, but had never spoken to her, Paul having pointedly declined to make the introduction. Biggles gathered from Major Payne that she was popular in the village, always being ready to take part in any local affair.

The village of Polstow comprised a number of grey stone houses, none modern, some in rows or pairs but others detached, scattered along a quarter of a mile of sandy hill that fringed a low cliff which held back the sea. At the bottom end, in a dip as it were, for beyond rose another hill, isolated in its own grounds stood the hotel. From it, in the direction of the village, the road climbed gently to the far end of the street where frowned a mediaeval church. There was no resident incumbent and the vicarage was in a sad state of

disrepair.

One or two of the cottages had been condemned by the local authority and were falling into ruins, with hedges overgrown and the gardens abandoned to weeds. Some of the others had been restored and were well kept. It was in one of these lived Vera Harrington with an elderly servant named Miss Lewis, a person Biggles had not so far seen.

The main topic of conversation at this time was the annual Flower Show, organized to take place in a few days in the parish hall.

Who lived in the several other houses, with one or two exceptions Biggles did not know. He had not troubled to inquire; but he thought the majority of the men, from their appearance, worked on the land, at farms in the district.

One man he had come to know, from encountering him digging in the sand at low tide for lugworms, was named Trelawny, generally known as Mick. He had chatted with him, once or twice. Single, and living alone, he was a dark, handsome, wild-looking young giant of a man in the late twenties who owned a decrepit sailing dinghy and with it earned a somewhat precarious living by fishing, chiefly for crabs and lobsters, which he sold to the hotel or to odd people who had ordered them. He appeared to manage.



... he was a dark, handsome, wild-looking young giant of a man in the late twenties ...

In a seaman's blue jersey, sea boots, hatless, with a mop of black curly hair and tiny gold rings in his ears, he made a spectacular figure. It was said that his parents had been gypsies, and from his appearance and habits that might well have been true. Biggles had never seen the place but had been told he

lived alone in a tumbledown shack just beyond the far end of the village, away from the other houses. Biggles had met him several times on the beach, and had found him, as so many men who live alone, inclined to be taciturn, but always polite. He knew the coast, the habits of the fish in its waters, and the local weather.

There was of course the usual, and typical, village pub, called the Fisherman's Arms. Biggles had never been inside the place, having no reason to do so, but he had seen the man who ran it, a corpulent, heavily-moustached individual named Hardy, standing in the doorway with his thumbs in the armholes of a waistcoat crossed by a watch chain rather too massive to be gold.

Vera Harrington lived in a picturesque old thatched cottage named, appropriately since it was thatched and said to be one of the oldest houses in the village, The Old Thatched House.

Biggles was already on easy terms with the woman who ran the sub-post office, a Mrs. Hayward. This was also the village shop where a curious variety of commodities could be bought, and this naturally made it the centre of local gossip. Such news, clearly, was more important than events that happened in the rest of the world. For anything out of the ordinary, however, it was necessary to make a journey to Truro. This, for those who had no transport of their own, meant a walk of two miles to the main road, which was served by a twice daily bus service.

A few regulars made brief visits. On Sunday mornings a curate arrived from somewhere on a bicycle to take a service at the church. A postman went through in a small post office car, collecting and delivering mail at the shop. At less frequent intervals a policeman did his beat on a motor cycle. He did not always stop. Presumably there was nothing for him to do. Twice weekly a travelling van halted for a time outside the shop to offer for sale bread, meat and fish. A milk lorry went through early in the morning to collect the produce from nearby farms. It was all very pleasant and orderly. The weather remained fine and warm.

Apart from the woman at the post office, whom Biggles had got to know through calling to post the postcards he had promised, he had spoken to only one other resident, a retired doctor named Augustus Venner, who lived alone in a house the garden of which ran parallel with that of the Old Thatched House. He was a very old man who seldom went out, and, so Biggles had gathered, was unpopular with his neighbours. According to Major Payne he had spent most of his life as resident medical officer on a timber estate in British Guiana. He had written a book on his experiences. He was now crippled with rheumatism. Biggles had seen him, grey and bent nearly double, hobbling about on two sticks in his garden. He had passed the time of day with him over the gate and found him to be civil enough if not cordial.

Speaking of this later with Major Payne he had learned the reason for his unpopularity. He had a bee in his bonnet about the Flower Show. He had said

some rude things about it and would no longer participate, holding it to be crooked. The rule was, exhibits were supposed to be home grown flowers and vegetables only. The doctor claimed, among other things, that to win the prizes, some people in the village, and other villages that were allowed to enter, had been going to distant professional growers and buying high quality stuff which they showed as their own produce. The Major admitted there might have been grounds for this complaint in the past, but the practice had now been stopped. It had happened at other places besides Polstow. Anyway, the old man had retired from the scene in a huff and had become something of a recluse. It was a pity because the doctor was a gentleman in every sense of the word; but there it was. He was looked after by a daily woman, a Mrs. Chandler, who came in, mornings only, to tidy the house and prepare the old man's meals.

Actually, as Biggles could buy his cigarettes at the little bar of the hotel he seldom went into the village, local gossip meaning nothing to him.

He had developed a regular routine. First, an early morning swim in the sea. Then breakfast. After that he would walk the length of the beach and amble between the rocks in bare feet examining the miscellaneous flotsam and jetsam left in the pools by the tide. After lunch he glanced through the newspapers which by that time had arrived and then lounged on the terrace overlooking the sea for the rest of the day. Towards sunset he was usually joined by Captain Gower who, with a glass of rum in his hand, had many a good tale to tell of his adventures at sea.

Biggles did not disclose his own occupation, seeing no reason to do so.

Such was the situation when the tranquillity of the village, and of the hotel, was shattered by an event which, while at first it left Biggles unperturbed, had the effect on the little community that might be expected when sudden death rears its ugly head.

CHAPTER III

DEATH COMES TO POLSTOW

Although he was unaware of it the first indication Biggles had of something wrong was the arrival of a police car with three officers, a Chief Superintendent, a sergeant and the local policeman whom he knew by sight. At the moment they pulled up at the hotel he was hanging his swimming costume on the rail of the terrace to dry in the hot sun. He paid little attention, assuming the visit to be a courtesy call. But as time went on, and the police, who had gone into the hotel, did not reappear, he began to wonder if there was more to it than he had imagined. But at the most he did not visualise anything worse than a lost object, perhaps a theft.

When the police did emerge they had with them Paul Graveson. They were followed by the lad's father, in a state of distress, and his mother, who was in tears and on the verge of hysterics. The car drove off, the police taking Paul with them. The parents hurried back into the hotel.

Biggles lit a cigarette and waited for some explanation of this strange event, although the obvious one was that the boy had been involved in a car accident.

It was brought by Captain Gower. He, too, appeared agitated, and still, apparently unaware of it, had his table napkin in his hand.



Captain Gower

"What's going on?" asked Biggles, casually, but with pardonable curiosity.

"It's Vera. Vera Harrington."

"What about her?"

"She's dead."

"You mean, she's been killed in an accident?" To Biggles the sudden death of a young, active and presumably healthy girl, couldn't mean anything else.

"How did it happen, and where?"

"How did what happen?"

"The accident."

"I didn't say anything about an accident."

"Then what are you talking about?"

Captain Gower made a grimace and regarded Biggles with eyes eloquent with sinister significance. "The police don't seem to think it was an accident, anyway."

Biggles looked puzzled. "What are you hinting at? Out with it, man."

"There seems to be a doubt as to how the girl died."

"What's Paul Graveson got to do with it?"

"Why do you suppose the police have taken him away?"

Biggles stared. "You're not going to tell me she's been—murdered!"

"That's evidently what the police think."

“For heaven’s sake! And they suspect Paul Graveson—”

Gower nodded sombrely. “That’s it.”

“How was she killed?”

“The police are not sure of that yet.”

“I don’t understand. Can’t you be a bit more explicit? If the girl had been murdered how could there be any doubt about it? There’d be signs of violence.”

“I gather the police haven’t so far found anything like that.”

“Then why this talk of murder?”

“What else could it be? The police have taken young Graveson to Truro for further questioning. That should tell you the lines they’re thinking on. I always knew that boy was no good.”

“It’s a bit early to talk like that. Why should they suspect him?”

“Because it appears he was the last person to see her alive.”

“How was that?”

“He was at the Thatched House late last night.”

“What about the woman who lived with Vera—her housekeeper, or whatever she was.”

“What about her?”

“Wasn’t she in the house?”

“Miss Lewis. Yes, she was there, but she says she went to bed shortly after she’d let Paul in. Vera was all right then. There’d been nothing wrong with her all day. She says Paul was still there, talking to Vera, when she went up to her room. When she took up her early morning cup of tea, there she was, lying dead on the floor.”

“Where?”

“In her bedroom. Miss Lewis had thought there must be something wrong because when she came down, the first thing she saw was the sitting-room lamp still burning, having been on all night. The light in Vera’s bedroom was still on, too.”

“What did Miss Lewis do?”

“She rushed over to the Post Office and told Mrs. Hayward. She phoned for the police and a doctor. My God! What a carry-on, in a quiet place like this.”

“Where did you get all this information?”

“The Paynes have just told me. No one’s talking of anything else.”

“So I can imagine.”

At this juncture Major Payne appeared. He, too, not unnaturally, looked upset and harassed. “This is a nice business,” he muttered grimly. He looked at Biggles. “You’ve heard Vera has been found dead?”

“Captain Gower has just told me. How much do you know about it?”

“Paul has been taken to Truro to make a statement; then the police are coming back to question everyone. Meanwhile no one may leave the hotel.”

Biggles was now taking more interest. “I don’t quite get the hang of all this. According to Gower there were no signs of violence on the body.”

“That’s right.”

“Then why all the fuss? There’s nothing unusual about people dying sudden deaths.”

“Mostly old people.”

“Not necessarily.”

“Well, I can’t believe that a girl of Vera’s age, as fit as a fiddle, never a day’s illness in her life, could just drop dead. The police don’t believe it, either. No, she didn’t die a natural death.”

“How about an accident?”

“How could she die by accident in a house that size, with no gas or electricity? She didn’t fall down the stairs, and it’s unlikely that such a fall would have killed her if she had. There’d be signs of it. She was found on the floor of her bedroom.”

“Well, what’s the answer?”

“There can only be one. She was killed, somehow, by someone.”

“All right. So she was killed. What was the motive? People rarely commit murder for no reason at all. Had she got any valuable jewellery?”

“I don’t think so, I’ve never seen any.”

“Did she keep a lot of money in the house?”

“She hadn’t a lot to keep. I know that because she’s often said so. Her mother, who died about a year ago, left her comfortably off, but nothing more than that, except the house she lived in. According to the doctor Vera had been dead for hours when he examined her. She was still in the clothes she’d worn the previous evening so she must have died overnight, before she went to bed. It was Miss Lewis who told the police that young Paul was there late.”

“What have they done with the body?”

“Taken it to Truro for autopsy.”

“What has Paul to say about this? Does he admit he was there?”

“He couldn’t deny it. Miss Lewis let him in. That was at ten o’clock. Moreover, he left his gloves there. The police brought them here and showed them to him. He said they were his. He must have left them at the Thatched House.”

“How did he take this news?”

“He was just finishing his breakfast when the police walked in. They brought him into my office rather than talk in front of the other guests. He seemed stunned, thunderstruck, when they told him Vera was dead. All he could say was: ‘I don’t believe it. I don’t believe it.’ He seemed unable to grasp it. Neither could I if it comes to that. He swears she was perfectly normal and in the best of spirits when he left her.”

“Why did he go to the house at that hour, anyway? Surely it was a bit late to make a call?”

“He says she’d be expecting him. There was nothing unusual about it. He could drop in at any time. He’s often seen her home at eleven o’clock and after when she’s dined here with us.”

"I believe he was, or hoped to be, more than friendly with her."

"He made no secret that he was infatuated with her. He'd proposed marriage, but she'd put him off by saying she was too old for him. She was twenty-four although she didn't look it. This, of course, was before she became engaged."

"Oh! So she was engaged?"

"Yes. To a naval officer she'd known all her life."

"Paul knew about that?"

"Of course. She wore an engagement ring."

"How did he take it?"

"There appeared to be no hard feelings. They remained the best of friends."

"Where's this naval type now?"

"I believe he's at sea with his ship."

"Have Vera's relatives been told what has happened?"

"If she has any she's never mentioned them to us."

"Were you in the room when the police questioned Paul?"

"Yes. The Superintendent had already got a statement from Miss Lewis, and Mrs. Hayward at the Post Office."

"What had Paul to say?"

"His story was this. In the late afternoon he went to Truro to get some tobacco for his father who smokes a brand you can't get in the village. That was true because he brought the tobacco home and gave it to his father. He said he asked Vera to go with him but she said she couldn't because she had some work to do in connexion with the Flower Show. In Truro he filled up with petrol and bought Vera a box of the chocolates she particularly liked. On the way back he'd stopped at a nursery garden to buy her some flowers."

"Why buy flowers? Had Vera none in her garden?"

"Nothing to speak of."

Captain Gower interposed: "That wouldn't be the same thing, anyway. Because a woman has flowers in her garden doesn't stop her being flattered if a man takes her some."

"I'll take your word for it," Biggles told him. "You probably know more about that sort of thing than I do."

Major Payne resumed. "Paul says he didn't drop the presents in as he passed her house on the way home because it was getting late and he wanted to take a bath before dinner. He told Vera he'd bring her some chocolates so she knew he'd be along some time. It didn't matter when."

"But taking them later would give him more time with her."

"Of course. That may have been the intention. When he came back to the hotel from Truro he didn't bring the chocolates and flowers in with him. He left them in the car. After dinner he took them along. I myself saw him go out and I looked at the time. It was just half past nine. I mentioned it."

"Did he go in the car?"

"No. The Superintendent asked him that. He said it seemed hardly worth

while. It's no distance to the Thatched House. It was a fine night, anyway, and as he felt like stretching his legs he walked up. Miss Lewis let him in and remarked that she was just going to bed. She's in bed regularly by ten o'clock. Paul says he didn't see her again. He stayed talking to Vera for half an hour. She gave him a glass of sherry and had one herself. That appears to be true because Miss Lewis told the police that when she came down this morning the glasses were still on the table. So were the roses and the chocolates. The box had been opened. The lid was off and she noticed that some of the chocolates had gone. Paul says they both ate one or two. When he left she saw him to the door. Her last words to him were she was going to put the roses in water and then go to bed."

"What time was that?"

"He left the house about a couple of minutes after ten-thirty."

"That would be right if he says he stayed with Vera only half an hour. How could he be so exact about the time he left?"

"The Superintendent also asked him that. He said because Vera called attention to the time, which he took to be a hint that he'd stayed long enough. He looked at the clock and saw it was half past ten. He left almost immediately and arrived back at the hotel at twenty to eleven. He went straight to bed. His parents confirm that because they were waiting for him to come in and they all went upstairs together."

Biggles tapped the ash off his cigarette. "If Paul's story is true it should be easy enough to confirm. The post mortem should iron out any mystery. It sounds to me like a heart attack."

"I hope you're right, otherwise it looks as if that young man will have some difficult questions to answer," put in Captain Gower, stiffly.

Biggles frowned. "What are you implying?"

"Er—well—"

"Are you suggesting that Paul murdered her?"

"It looks that way to me."

"You're prejudiced. You don't like the boy."

"You're right. I don't. The way he speaks to his mother sometimes makes me want to clout him."

"How he speaks to his mother doesn't make him guilty of murder."

"So you don't think he did it?"

"Murder has yet to be proved. If it is, where do we look for the motive? Paul was in love with the girl, or he thought he was, which comes to the same thing. We may call it calf-love, but lads of that age can get it badly."

"If he'd got it as badly as that the motive might have been jealousy."

"Jealousy of what, or whom?"

"On account of Vera's engagement."

Biggles shook his head. "No. That won't do."

"Why not?"

"When jealousy is a motive for murder you don't have to look for signs of

it. A jealous man kills in the heat of anger, usually after a quarrel. He may shoot, stab, strangle or use his fists, or possibly the first weapon that comes to hand; and you can't kill anyone like that without leaving marks to show how it was done."

"Apparently the police have found nothing of that sort," put in Major Payne.

Biggles resumed. "Had there been a row voices would have been raised. Had there been a scuffle, or a cry for help such as a girl would naturally make if she was attacked, in a cottage that size Miss Lewis must have heard it—that is, unless she's deaf or an exceptionally heavy sleeper. Tell me this. Was there any indication of the house having been broken into?"

Major Payne answered. "No. Miss Lewis says when she came down she found everything locked up as usual. Door bolted, windows fastened, and so on. Vera, always being the last to go to bed, attended to that herself."

"How about poison?" murmured Captain Gower. "That wouldn't leave any marks—anyhow, not on the outside of the body."

"How would it be administered?"

"Perhaps in the sherry."

"Nonsense. It was Vera's own sherry. As hostess she'd pour it out herself. It's hard to see how anyone else could have had access to it, except, of course, Miss Lewis; in which case Paul would have had a dose, too."

"What about the chocolates? Remember, Paul brought them home with him before he took them to her."

"Are you suggesting that he doctored them?"

"He might have done. He had the opportunity."

"Oh, come now, wait a minute, skipper," reproved Biggles gently. "You shouldn't jump to such conclusions without a shred of evidence to support them. A man's life may be at stake. Murder by poison is not a method employed to kill on the spur of the moment, it's the result of a lot of thought and careful planning. People may walk about with a gun or a knife on them but they don't carry poison in their pockets. A man contemplating that sort of crime must first get the fatal dose from somewhere, and that isn't easy. It must come from a source that can't be traced to him, and that implies deliberate cold-blooded premeditation. Can you see Paul Graveson behaving like that, so utterly callous, because I can't. Assuming he *was* capable of working out and carrying out such a damnable scheme would he be such a fool as to go about the business openly, scattering clues right and left, letting everyone know he was going to call on Vera and aware that Miss Lewis would let him in? That doesn't make sense to me. And if it comes to that we've only Miss Lewis' word for her part of the story. How long has she been with Vera?"

Major Payne answered. "All her life. She nursed her as a baby. She loved the girl like her own child. She's nearly out of her mind. We needn't think about her. She's in the clear."

"You're probably right; but don't overlook that that sort of love can be

capable of almost insane jealousy.”

Biggles stubbed his cigarette. “We’re going too fast, though, on what little information we have. I suggest we drop the subject until the police have produced evidence as to the cause of the unfortunate girl’s death.”

Major Payne agreed. “Paul’s a queer chap in some ways but he doesn’t look the type to kill anything larger than a butterfly.”

“Looks are nothing to go on,” stated Biggles. “But here are the police back. I see they’ve brought Paul with them, so it doesn’t look as if they’re going to hold him in custody. Presumably they haven’t enough evidence for that.”

“They’re going to question everyone in the hotel,” said Major Payne.

Biggles smiled faintly. “In that case I hope we’ve all got a cast iron alibi.”

“They also said something about searching Paul’s room,” went on Major Payne. “I believe they still want to question one or two people in the village.”

“Who, for instance?”

“Mick Trelawny for one. They couldn’t get hold of him this morning. He was out in his boat going round his lobster pots.”

“Why him?”

“He’s been friendly with Vera for a long time and often takes her in a fish.”

“There was some talk in the village about those two at one time,” offered Gower, meaningly. “People seemed to think they were getting a sight too friendly.”

“In a place this size a man and a woman have only to be seen together once or twice to set tongues wagging,” sneered Biggles.

“In fine weather she’s been known to go out with him, baiting the lobster pots.”

“And why the devil shouldn’t she?” demanded Biggles, irritably. “There’s little enough to do here, in all conscience.”

“I was only repeating what I’d heard in the village,” expostulated Captain Gower.

“More fool you to listen,” growled Biggles,

“He was out all last night, fishing,” said Major Payne.

“Who says so?” queried Gower.

“Nobody, as far as I know. But his boat wasn’t at its mooring. But I’d better be going in case the police want me.” The Major strode away.

“I imagine Miss Lewis’ evidence will be the most important factor in the case,” surmised Captain Gower.

“That and the result of the post mortem examination. We don’t know yet how or why the girl died,” reminded Biggles. “We might as well have a drink while we’re waiting for the police to do their stuff.”

CHAPTER IV

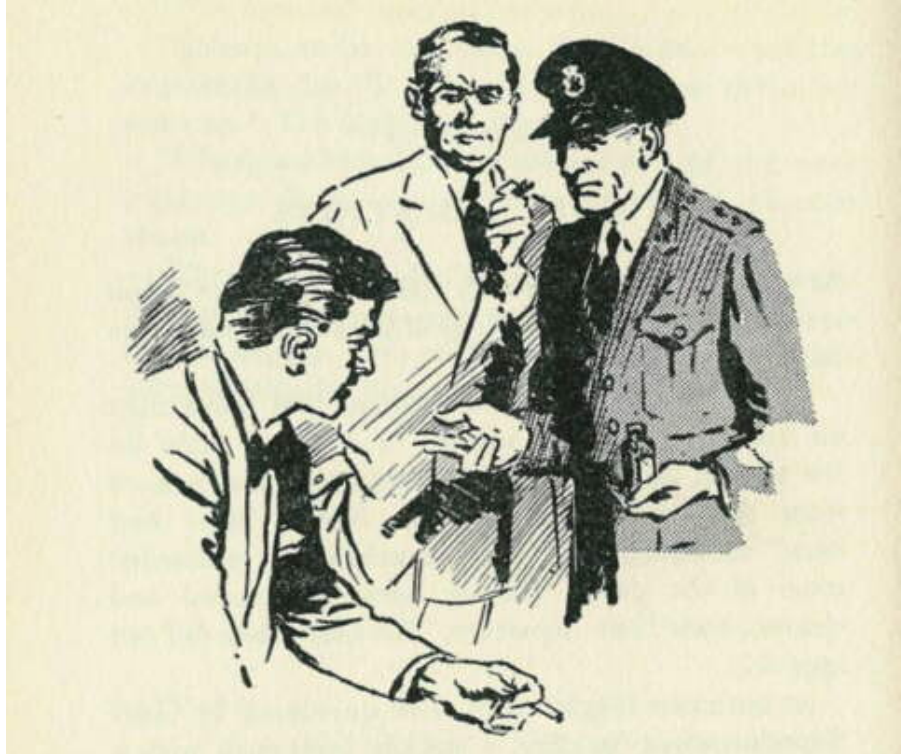
MOSTLY QUESTIONS

As an earthquake is usually followed by more if less severe shocks, so in the village of Polstow following the death of Vera Harrington.

In an uneasy atmosphere of gloom that had settled on the hotel Biggles waited in a deck chair on the terrace for the police interrogation. He learned from the house boy that the Flower Show had been cancelled. As the investigation proceeded some of the guests, having been interviewed and cleared, took their departure. The Gravesons did not appear.

At last came Biggles' turn to be questioned by Chief Superintendent Smalley, a stockily built man with a glint in his eyes and an uncompromising expression. He pulled up a chair and sat facing Biggles, with the sergeant standing by notebook in hand. Biggles could easily account for his movements overnight because he had sat on the terrace talking with Captain Gower until after eleven o'clock when they both retired to bed. This confirmed what Gower, who had already been questioned, had said.

Biggles wondered why he had been left until last. He was soon to know. To his surprise and somewhat to his annoyance the Superintendent led off with the last question he expected.



"Is it correct that you're attached to a special department at Scotland Yard?"

Biggles' eyebrows went up, for he had not mentioned this to anyone.

"That's right, Chief. How did you know?"

"Major Payne told me."

"How did he know?"

"An Assistant Commissioner at the Yard who has often stayed here rang him up and told him he was sending one of his staff along for a rest."

Biggles sighed. "As simple as that. I should have asked my chief to keep the soft pedal on that angle. I must tell Payne not to broadcast the information."

"What's your official position—if you don't mind me asking?"

"Air Detective-Inspector. The air part of it means I specialize in any trouble involving aviation."

"I suppose you'll be taking an interest in this case?"

"Not more than comes my way as a casual spectator. As you know, I'm on holiday."

The Superintendent then revealed that curious attitude of mind so often encountered in the provinces, even among professional men, where anything to do with London is concerned.

"I'm glad to hear it," he said. "We may be country bumpkins but we can

usually handle our affairs all right.”

Biggles looked pained. “I’m sure you can. Who said anything about country bumpkins? I didn’t. Don’t worry. I’m not likely to interfere.”

“Sorry—but we sometimes feel—”

“I know. You resent the idea that we may think we’re smarter than you are. Forget it. That notion, which let me say is quite wrong, starts with you, not us.”

The Superintendent switched the subject. “How well did you know Vera Harrington?”

“Only by sight. I’ve seen her here. I’ve never spoken to her.”

“This lad Paul Graveson is thought to have been keen on her, I understand.”

“That seemed to be the impression. I wouldn’t know. Having learned to mind my own business I’ve never given it a serious thought.”

“This is purely a routine question. Where were you last night?”

It was then that Biggles described how he had sat on the terrace with Captain Gower. “Notice anything unusual?”

“Not a thing.”

“Did you see Paul Graveson about?”

“No. I heard him park that noisy car of his about an hour before dinner and later I saw him in the dining-room. I didn’t see him after that.”

“Did you speak to him?”

“No. We had little in common to talk about. But tell me this, because I’m still not quite clear as to what this is all about—I’ve only heard a garbled version which to me doesn’t add up to make sense—I take it that at this moment you’re dealing with the death of Vera Harrington as a case of murder. Is that right?”

“Until I get a pathological report which says the girl died from natural causes I’m bound to. After all, here was a girl who had never had a day’s illness in her life. Never complained of an ache or a pain. Up to six o’clock yesterday evening she was bustling about on work in connexion with the Flower Show. Even at ten o’clock last night she was alive and well. There’s ample evidence of that. Within an hour she was dead, in circumstances which must be regarded as peculiar.”

“You’re sure about the time factor?”

“It’s confirmed by the doctor. He reckons death occurred at between ten and eleven last night; so as Paul Graveson was there, on his own admission, until ten-thirty, it must have been sudden.”

“So you think he may have had something to do with it.”

“What else can I think? Suspicion is bound to fall on him.”

“When do you expect a medical report?”

“I should have a preliminary report by tomorrow morning. I should know if there was any heart trouble, or if the girl died of cyanide poisoning.”

“Why cyanide in particular?”

"I have reasons. Well, I think that's about all. I shan't have to trouble you again."

"Good. That suits me."

The Superintendent, after a moment's hesitation, went on: "By the way, speaking professionally and strictly between ourselves, assuming you've formed an opinion of Paul Graveson since you've been here, would you judge him to be a type capable of murder?"

Biggles considered the question. "Since you ask me, Chief, frankly, no. Minor crime, perhaps, because some of these modern youngsters, who hardly regard it as such, take a less serious view of the law than we did in our day. But with a very occasional exception they draw the line at murder."

The Superintendent then produced what he obviously regarded as a trump card. From a pocket he took a small glass jar with a glass stopper. "Then how do you account for this?"

"What is it?"

"Cyanide. Enough to knock over a herd of elephants."

Biggles' surprise must have shown on his face. "Where did you find that?"

"In Paul Graveson's room, wrapped in a piece of rag in the bottom of a drawer."

"No one in his right mind would leave the stuff standing about. The gas it gives off can knock a man out."

"Maybe he had a reason for hiding it."

"If I'm right in guessing the reason you have in mind he surely wouldn't be such a fool as to keep it in his room. There's no doubt about it belonging to him?"

"None whatever. He says it's his. It's labelled in his own writing. Hydrocyanic acid, to be specific."

"Could he account for having it in his possession?"

"He says he's had it for years. His explanation is it's the stuff he puts in the bottom of a killing-jar when he goes out after butterflies and moths."

"Could be. We know he is a bug hunter and we know cyanide is used in killing-bottles. How did he get hold of it? He'd need a permit to buy it, in which case there should be a record somewhere."

"He says he made it himself."

"That isn't difficult if you know how. It can be derived from a number of plants, almonds, laurel, and others. The stuff smells of almonds."

"I'd wager this is the stuff that killed Vera Harrington. One grain and death is practically instantaneous."

"You might lose your bet."

The Superintendent looked surprised. "You still think Paul Graveson is innocent?"

"Innocent of what?"

"Murdering Vera Harrington."

"Surely it has yet to be proved that she *was* murdered. For that reason

alone I'm keeping an open mind about it."

"But the stuff in this bottle—"

"In the bottle is a different matter from being inside the body of Vera Harrington."

"He took the girl a box of chocolates with a bunch of roses. Miss Lewis says she saw them. In the morning when she went down the box had been opened and some of the chocolates eaten. It looks as though the girl was eating them while she was putting the roses in a vase."

"Where are the chocolates now?"

"At my headquarters, being analysed."

"Okay, Chief. I've told you what I think. It's your pigeon, not mine."

"Wouldn't you think this is sufficient evidence for holding young Graveson on suspicion?"

"It isn't what I think, Chief," replied Biggles, evenly. "But if I were in your place I'd feel inclined to watch my step until I'd seen the pathologist's report on the post mortem. If there's cyanide in the girl's stomach he'll find it. That would put a different complexion on the case."

"Meanwhile the bird might fly."

"If he did he couldn't fly far."

The Superintendent looked at Biggles curiously. "Have you some interest in young Graveson?"

"None at all."

"Then why are you so sure he didn't kill this girl?"

"I didn't say that. I'm not sure he didn't. I'm not sure of anything. I'm merely expressing my opinion that she didn't die of cyanide poisoning. As you said a moment ago, cyanide kills almost instantaneously. Vera was all right when Paul left the house."

"We've only his word for that."

"Then put it this way. If Paul had given the girl a dose of cyanide—no matter how—how was it she was able to go round the house and lock up after he'd gone? Only she could have done that because Miss Lewis had gone to bed. I understand that's what she says."

"That's right."

"But remember, as you would say, we've only got her word for that. Assuming it to be the truth, and I'm not questioning it, it means that only Vera could have locked up. Could she have done that if Paul had given her a dose of cyanide?"

The Superintendent was looking hard at Biggles' face. "I see what you mean," he said slowly, putting the cyanide back in his pocket. "You make a point there."

"What's happening at the Thatched House now?"

"Miss Lewis is staying only long enough to tidy up and put dust covers on the furniture. As soon as possible she's going to Truro, where she has a sister living. That suits me. She'll be handy if I want her. Well, I must be getting

along. I still have two more people to see. The old man, Doctor somebody, who lives next door to Vera, was in bed when I called. His daily, a Mrs. Chandler, told me he didn't get up much before lunch-time. And there's another fellow. Trelawny. A fisherman of sorts. He was out in his boat when I went to the shack where he lives. He was out all night, they say. He may have noticed something. I understand he knew Vera pretty well."

"I believe they were on good terms. He sometimes took her in some fish, and on occasion, so I'm told, she's been out with him, fishing."

"I'll hear what he has to say." Still the Superintendent hesitated. "Have you any other ideas about this business?"

"Oh come, Chief, you don't need any help from me," murmured Biggles, with a twinkle in his eye.

"That's right enough. But I'm always ready to admit that two heads are sometimes better than one."

"Naturally, being on the spot I'm bound to give this business a certain amount of thought. But I don't want you to get the idea that I'm butting in—"

"Never mind about that. What's your candid opinion?"

"All right. Remember, you asked me. There are one or two details which have already struck me as a bit odd. I've often picked up a lead by concentrating on anything unusual, however apparently irrelevant it may be. I mean, any departure from what we might call normal human behaviour."

"Have you noticed anything like that?"

"Yes, take these chocolates, for instance. Correct me if I've got the facts wrong, but I understand that in her statement Miss Lewis says she found the box of chocolates on the table with the lid off."

"That's right."

"Well, that struck me as peculiar because most people, when they've finished eating chocolates from a box, put the lid back on. Vera didn't do that. She left the lid off. I ask myself why."

"The chocolates are being analysed."

"So you told me. Again, according to what Payne tells me, Vera's last words to Paul were that she was going to put the roses, those he'd brought her, in water before going to bed. Did she do that?"

"She started but she didn't finish. She'd fetched a glass vase of water and put it on the table near the chocolates. She'd arranged a few of the roses in the vase but the rest were still lying on the table."

"So the question arises, why didn't she finish the job while she was at it? That looks to me as if she was interrupted. She was found upstairs. Why did she go up? Did something happen to cause her to go up? Was that what caused her to break off in what she was doing? She went up. That we know. She never came down. Why? Because she couldn't. She was either dead or dying, because it must have been at that moment that death struck. She was able to get up. When she went up she obviously had every intention of coming down again or she would have put out the light in the sitting-room. The

chances are she would also have finished arranging the flowers, which she would hardly have left lying on the table all night, and put the lid on the box of chocolates.”

“Yes, that all sounds reasonable.”

“There was also a light in the bedroom, I understand. Did she light the lamp?”

“No. Miss Lewis had already done that. She did it every night when she went up. Vera often read in bed so she put everything ready for her.”

“I see. Then the question you have to answer is, why did she go upstairs before she was quite ready to go to bed? Presumably she had already locked up. All she had to do, then, was finish the roses and put out the light. Why didn’t she do that?”

“The most obvious answer is she heard a sound of some sort and went up to see what had caused it.”

“That could be the answer. But what about Miss Lewis? Wouldn’t she have heard the same noise?”

“She says she heard nothing. Her hearing is all right and it was a dead still night.”

“Still, as you say, Chief, Vera may have heard something. The alternative is, she went up to fetch something. What was it? What could she want at that hour of night? Whatever the reason it must have been urgent or she wouldn’t have broken off in the middle of what she was doing. Find out what it was, Chief, and you’ll be well on your way to the solution of your problem.”

“You may be right. But how am I going to work that one out? There isn’t a smell of a clue.”

“There must be one. It’s up to you to find it. Vera didn’t stop what she was doing for no reason at all. The answer’s there, somewhere.”

Major Payne came out. Speaking to the Superintendent he said: “There’s a woman here asking to speak to you if you were still about.”

“Who is she?”

“Mrs. Chandler.”

“You mean Doctor Venner’s daily. I saw her this morning.”

“That’s right.”

“Any idea what she wants to see me about?”

“No. She won’t say. But she says she’s brought a message from Doctor Venner so it may have something to do with Vera. The Doctor would have walked down himself but he isn’t well enough.”

“In that case I’d better see her. You might as well bring her here.”

Major Payne went off.

The sergeant produced his notebook.

“Want me to go?” asked Biggles.

“No. You can stay if you like to hear what she has to say.”



CHAPTER V

TRELAWNY

In a couple of minutes the hotel proprietor was back with a buxom young woman who did not look too pleased at being sent down the hill on a hot day. She was still in her working clothes.

"You wanted to see me?" prompted the Superintendent.

"Not me. The Doctor sent me with a message."

"What's your name?"

"Emily Chandler."

"And you work for Doctor Venner—is that right?"

"That's right. I go in mornings only, like I told you when you called."

"What's the message?"

"I told you the Doctor wasn't up when you called at the house."

"That's right. So you did."

"When he came down I told him what had happened and that you'd been to see him."

"Do you mean you told him about the death of Miss Harrington?"

"Yes."

"Was that the first he knew of it?"

"Yes."

"I see. Go on."

"He said it reminded him of something, and he thought you might be interested to know that Trelawny was at the Thatched House last night."

There was a general stiffening in the attitudes of those present.

"How does he know that?" inquired the Superintendent.

"He saw him."

"What time was this?"

"Three o'clock in the morning."

"*What* time?"

"Three o'clock this morning."

"Is that so?" said the Superintendent slowly. "He's quite sure of this?"

"Quite sure."

"How did this come about? What was the Doctor doing at three o'clock this morning?"

"Well, it was like this. He has the rheumatics pretty bad you know. It makes him sleep badly, never very long at a time. Last night was one of his bad nights. Had the pains awful bad. At three o'clock he couldn't stand no more of it so he got out of bed for some pills which he takes at such times. He was just going to get back into bed when he hears a sharp noise like the click of a gate latch. It was bright moonlight outside. Looking out of the window he saw Trelawny walking up the path that leads from the sea to the back door of

Miss Harrington's house. Thinking it was a funny time to be visiting, he watched, but he lost sight of Trelawny when he got into the shadow of the house, so he doesn't know what he did there. But after a minute or two he saw Trelawny go back the way he'd come. That's all. After what's happened the Doctor thought you'd like to know."



Looking out of the window he saw Trelawny walking up the path . . .

“He’s quite right,” returned the Superintendent, dryly. “Trelawny wasn’t at home when I called to see him this morning. A woman who lives close told me he’d been at sea all night, fishing.”

“That’s right. Well, he’s back home now. I saw his boat come in a while

ago.”

“Thank you, Mrs. Chandler. Tell the Doctor I’m much obliged to him for this information.”

“Anything else you want me for?”

“No, thank you.”

The woman turned and walked away.

The Superintendent turned to Biggles. “Do you know anything about this fellow Trelawny?”

“No. He’s a wild, tough-looking chap. Independent type. I’ve spoken to him once or twice. He seems a decent enough fellow. I’ve heard nothing against him.”

The Superintendent turned to the sergeant. “Have we ever had any trouble with him?”

“Not that I know of. I can’t recall anything.”

“All right. Go and fetch him. I’ll talk to him here. Take the car to save time.”

When the Sergeant had gone his senior officer turned again to Biggles. “This is a bit of an eye-opener. What do you make of it?”

“It’s not much use trying to make anything of it until you’ve heard what Trelawny has to say.”

Saying “I’ll leave you to it”, Major Payne went into the hotel.

“Sure you don’t want me to go, too?” Biggles asked the Superintendent.

“You can stay if you’re interested.”

“Of course I’m interested. This new development certainly is a startler.”

“It’s something I didn’t expect, I must admit.”

“Nor I.” Biggles took a cigarette from his case.

“It all goes to show,” declared the Superintendent, heavily.

“Show what?”

“That in this sort of case you can’t believe anybody or anything.”

Biggles did not pursue the matter.

In a few minutes the police car was back. The Sergeant reappeared, with Mick Trelawny, unshaven, his hair tousled, clad only in a pair of salt-stained trousers, an open shirt and gumboots. His face was pale and in his eyes was a belligerent gleam. “You want me?” he said, shortly.

“I found him in bed,” informed the sergeant, once more producing his notebook and pencil.

“That’s where you’d be if you’d been working all night,” returned Trelawny, in a disgruntled tone of voice.

“All right. We don’t want any of your lip,” snapped the Superintendent. “I’m going to ask you some questions. Think carefully before you answer them.”

“Fire away. Ask me anything you like. I’ve nothing to hide.”

“Is your name Mick Trelawny?”

“Michael Trelawny, if you want it right and proper.”

"You're a fisherman by trade?"

"I am."

"You knew Miss Harrington, I believe."

"I did."

"How well did you know her?"

"I'd say pretty well. She was a customer of mine, and her mother before her."

"When did you last see her?"

"Yesterday morning. I took her round a couple of pollack."

"Where were you last night?"

"Out in my boat, fishing. I thought I might pick up one or two bass."

"Do you mean you were out *all* night?"

"That's what I mean."

"How far out did you go?"

"Never more than a mile, I'd say."

"Did you come ashore at any time for anything?" This was the leading question and Biggles held his breath on the answer.

Trelawny didn't hesitate. "I did," he said bluntly.

"For what purpose?"

"To go to the Thatched House."

"Did you go there?"

"I did."

"At what hour was this?"

"I hadn't a watch on me, but as near as I could judge from the moon I'd say about three o'clock."

"Why did you go at such a time, knowing Miss Harrington and her servant must have gone to bed."

"That's just it. I didn't know they'd gone to bed."

"You must surely have supposed them to be in bed and asleep."

"I thought they were still up."

"Why?"

"Because the lights were still on, upstairs and down."

"How did you know that?"

"I could see them. They were the only lights in the village, I first noticed them about eleven o'clock, because usually by that time most lights are out except in the hotel. I wondered what was going on. When some time later, an hour mebbe, and they were still on. I thought something must be wrong. One of 'em taken ill, perhaps."

"So you came ashore to see. Was that it?"

"Not then. As time went on I kept looking more and more at the lights wondering why they hadn't been put out."

"Did you know which rooms the lights were in?"

"Not for certain. I was pretty sure about the sitting-room. I've been to the house often enough but I've never been upstairs. No reason to."

“Go on.”

“When it got to two o’clock, judging from the sky, I began to get worried, supposing there must have been an accident or something. Burglars, perhaps. Thinking I might be able to help I decided to have a look round. There was no wind so I had to use the oars. I pulled the boat up on the beach and went up the cliff to the house.”

“Up the cliff? Why up the cliff?”

“It was the shortest way. It’s easy to get up when you know how, and you’ve done it as many times as I have.”

“I see. Go on. Then what?”

“The lights were still on. Coming up to the house I went to the back gate and listened for a bit. Not hearing anything I went on to the house. I listened again, but still I couldn’t hear a sound. I tried the back door. It was locked. I went round to the front and tried that. Locked. Still thinking of burglars I looked at the windows. All shut. I still couldn’t hear anything inside, no talking, or anything like people moving about. I couldn’t make it out. All I could think was the lights had been left on by mistake. I considered knocking ‘em up to tell ‘em, but at the finish, reckoning they wouldn’t thank me for giving ‘em a fright at that time o’ night I went back to my boat.”

“Then what did you do?”

“I pulled out half a mile or so and did some more fishing; but not being able to get hold of anything I gave up and went round my lobster pots. No luck there, either. So I went home and went to bed for an hour or two’s sleep. That’s where I was when the sergeant here woke me up.”

“Did you see anyone when you came ashore?”

“Not a soul.”

“You know Miss Harrington was found dead this morning?”

“I know now. The sergeant told me.”

“And that was the first you knew about it?”

“Do you think I’d have gone to bed if I’d known that darling girl was dead?”

“Did you usually call her darling?”

“Not to her face. But that’s how I thought of her. One of the best, she was, and a good friend to me. Even now I can’t believe she’s dead.” The man was visibly upset. For a moment a lip quivered. His big fists opened and clenched.

“Were you in love with Miss Harrington?” asked the Superintendent softly.

Trelawny stared. “I don’t know. But now you mention it maybe I was. But I never thought of her that way. I can tell you this. If I ever got my hands on the devil who done that I’d twist his head off his shoulders.”

“Done what?”

“Murdered Vera.”

“Who said she’d been murdered? I haven’t said anything about murder.”

Trelawny blinked. “But how else could she have died so sudden?”

“I was hoping you might be able to tell me.”

A curious expression crept over Trelawny's face. His eyes opened wide. "You don't think *I* had anything to do with this?"

"Never mind what I think. You'll know more about that in due course. If there's any neck twisting to be done we'll do it when the time comes. All right. That's all for now. I shall want to see you again so don't go far away. I'll send for you if I need you."

For a moment Trelawny stood still, staring at the police officer. Then he turned sharply and strode away.

The sergeant closed his notebook and returned it to his pocket.

Said the Superintendent to Biggles: "Well, he certainly had the answers ready."

"Naturally."

"Why naturally?"

"Because a man who's telling the truth can answer any question without the slightest hesitation. He doesn't have to think, or watch his words. Trelawny didn't once hesitate."

"Maybe he wouldn't if he was hiding something. He'd anticipate the questions and have the answers pat."

"He didn't have much time to anticipate anything. He didn't know Vera was dead until the sergeant told him."

"So he says."

"He was still suffering from shock when he got here. You could see that from his face. Unless a liar is a particularly cool customer he has to think, if only for a split second, when he's asked questions, to make sure he isn't being trapped."

"So you think he was telling the truth?"

"At this juncture, yes. That's only my opinion."

"Why do you think that?"

"In the first place, his reaction to what was an unusual occurrence, I mean the lights being left on, were just what you'd expect of a man of that type. His story fits like a glove with what we know—the Doctor's version of seeing him on the path, the time, and the lights being on. He could hardly fail to notice them from the sea."

"All right. That, you say, is in the first place. What about the second place?"

"Doctor Venner looked out of his window because he heard the click of the gate latch. Would a man about to commit a crime be such a fool as to click the latch of the gate of the house he purposed entering, like an errand boy in broad daylight? It seems to me more likely that he'd creep up like a stalking cat."

"If you're right it was a bit of bad luck for him he chose to go to the house last night of all nights."

"Any other night he wouldn't have gone to the house, because the lights wouldn't have been on," Biggles pointed out.

“That may be, but we still have only his word for what he did when he went to the house.”

“If it comes to that we have only Miss Lewis’ word for what happened inside the house. You were lucky to have a witness of Trelawny’s arrival at the house, otherwise it’s unlikely you’d ever have known anything about it. You’d hardly expect to find witnesses of anything at three o’clock in the morning. If Trelawny sticks to his story you’ll find it hard to break down. There’s no evidence of the house having been entered, anyway.”

“You don’t think he did it?”

“That’s my opinion at this moment.”

“That’s what you said about Paul Graveson.”

“What of it?”

“If Paul didn’t murder the girl, and Trelawny didn’t, who the devil did?” growled the Superintendent.

“You’ll have a better chance of working that out, Chief, when you know for certain she *was* murdered, and how it was done.”

“Yes, I suppose you’re right,” conceded the Superintendent. “We should know more about it tomorrow.” He rose abruptly. “Well, I must be off. I’ll be seeing you again, no doubt. I shall be over.”

“You’ll find me here.”

The Superintendent went straight to his car and with the sergeant drove off.

Biggles observed, with a faint smile as he lit another cigarette, that he did not take Paul Graveson with him.

CHAPTER VI

ENTER THE GHOST

BIGGLES, alone on the terrace, remained undisturbed until his tea was brought out by the house boy, a cheerful local lad known to everyone as Jimmy.

“This is a dreadful thing about poor Miss Harrington, sir,” remarked the boy dolorously, as he unloaded his tray.

“Shocking,” returned Biggles, without looking up.

Jimmy sighed. “Such a nice lady. And to think I was talking to her only yesterday, little knowing it was the last time I should ever see her.”

“Oh, and where did you see her?” To Biggles this was merely conversation. Busy with his thoughts he was not really interested.

“At her house.”

“When was this?”

“When I took her the strawberries.”

That made Biggles look up. “You say you took her some strawberries?”

“Yes, sir.”

“When?”

“Yesterday morning. I suppose it’d be about eleven. The trouble with strawberries is they all come on with a rush in this sort of weather. Before you know where you are you’ve more than you know what to do with. We’ve tons in the vegetable garden.”

“I see,” replied Biggles, slowly. “So you took some to Miss Harrington.”

“I didn’t pick ‘em. I’m not allowed to. I only took ‘em up to the house.”

“Who did pick them?”

“Mrs. Payne. She got together a nice little basket of extra good ‘uns and asked me to take ‘em along to Miss Harrington.”

“And you did that?”

“Yes. She came to the door herself. I said, ‘From Mrs. Payne, Miss.’ She said, ‘Oh they’re lovely. We’ll have them for tea. Thank Mrs. Payne for me, Jimmy, and say I hope to be seeing her soon.’ Then she give me a glass o’ lemonade for me trouble.”

“Hm.”

“There’s your tea, sir.”

“Thank you, Jimmy.” The boy returned to the kitchen. Biggles, a slight frown creasing his forehead, poured out his tea.

A few minutes later Captain Gower appeared from the direction of the village, perspiring, carrying his hat, and from his haste on such a hot day clearly the bearer of news. Pulling up another chair to Biggles’ table he inquired, tersely: “I suppose you’ve heard the latest?”

“What do you call the latest?”

"About the bottle of cyanide being found in Paul Graveson's room."

"How did you learn about it?"

"Mrs. Payne has just told me."

"It seems to me, skipper, that too many people are telling too many people too much."

"Well, I'd say that just about settles him."

"Settles who?"

"Paul Graveson."

"You seem mighty anxious to see that wretched youth hanged."

"To me it's all as clear as daylight."

"You're an expert in these matters, I take it?"

"I ought to be, the number of books I've read on crime and criminals. Murder's right up my street."

"On this occasion we happen to be dealing with fact, not fiction."

"I don't see how that makes any difference. If you'd read a few thrillers yourself you'd know a bit more about this sort of thing."

The faintest suspicion of a smile softened Biggles' lips. "I'll think about it. Anyway, you've worked it out that Paul Graveson murdered Vera by poisoning her."

"It sticks out a mile."

"You know, skipper," returned Biggles gently, "you should think twice before you say a thing like that. Unless you keep a check on your tongue one of these days you're going to find yourself in court facing an action for slander."

"I don't see how there can be any doubt about it, now cyanide has been found in Paul's room."

"I suggest you wait until some has been found in Vera's stomach before you air your views in public."

"I'm entitled to my opinion."

"You are, as long as you keep it to yourself. Now I'll tell you something which presumably you haven't heard, or you'd be shouting about that, too."

"Oh! What is it?" Gower's face brightened with expectancy.

"Paul Graveson isn't the only person under suspicion."

"Really! Who's the other?"

"Mick Trelawny."

"How does he come into it?"

"He was at the Thatched House at three o'clock this morning."

Gower whistled softly. "Is that a fact?"

"It is."

"Who discovered that?"

"He was seen there."

"Good God! Well, I can't say I'm surprised. I always did think that feller was a wrong 'un."

"Indeed. Why?"

“You’ve only got to look at him. Messing about all his life for a few fish. I wouldn’t trust him a yard.”

“According to you, skipper, everyone’s a wrong ‘un. Fortunately the law takes a different view. Everyone’s a right ‘un until it’s proved otherwise.”

Gower shook his head. “Well, that may be so, but I still say this will turn out to be a case of poisoning.”

“You could be right. If so, no doubt you’ll be able to work out who gave Vera the poison, how and why.”

“Paul was the most likely one to have done it. We know he took her that box of chocolates. Those were the last things to pass her lips.”

“How do you know that?”

“She was dead a few minutes later,”

“The fact that Paul gave her chocolates proves nothing. Other people gave her things to eat. If it’s proved that Vera was poisoned everything she ate and drank the previous twenty-four hours must be suspect.”

“Such as?”

“Trelawny took her in some fish. Mrs. Payne sent her a basket of strawberries—”

Captain Gower’s eyes narrowed. “Strawberries, eh. The devil she did. That wouldn’t surprise me, either.”

“What wouldn’t surprise you?”

“If those strawberries had been tinkered with.”

“How can you say that? Why?”

“Between you and me I’ve thought more than once that Payne had his eye on that gal. You can always see the way the wind’s blowing by the way two people look at each other.”

“You don’t miss much, do you? What’s Payne got to do with it?”

“If Mrs. Payne had spotted what was going on she might—”

Gower broke off as the Major appeared suddenly.

“Did I hear my wife’s name mentioned?” he inquired.

Biggles answered. “Gower’s convinced that Vera was poisoned. I said in that case everything she’d eaten or drunk up to the time of her death would automatically have to be examined. We know Paul gave her chocolates. Mick Trelawny says he took her in some fish—”

“Where does my wife come in?”

“She sent her up a basket of strawberries yesterday.”

“How do you know that?”

“Jimmy happened to mention it when he brought out my tea. He took them up to the Thatched House. Vera said she’d have them for her tea. Didn’t you know your wife had sent up some strawberries?”

There was a curious expression on Major Payne’s face. “No, I didn’t know anything about it. No doubt my wife forgot to mention it to me.” The Major added hastily: “Not that there was any reason why she should. We’ve often sent things to Vera from the garden. There are times we have more fruit and

vegetables than we know what to do with, and there's no point in letting them rot."

"Of course." Biggles brushed the matter aside as of no importance.

The subject was dropped when at that moment Mrs. Payne herself came out on to the terrace.

"Still talking about this depressing business of Vera?" she queried, as she joined the men.

Biggles nodded. "It's hard to get away from it."

"When all this talk of murder is finished it wouldn't surprise me if it was decided that Vera died of shock." Mrs. Payne spoke knowingly.

Biggles looked up at her. "But why should Vera die of shock? What could give her such a shock in her own house?"

"The ghost."

"Ghost! What ghost?"

"Didn't you know? The Thatched House is haunted."

"Nonsense," muttered Major Payne. "Superstitious nonsense."

"Everyone in the village knows the house is haunted," declared Mrs. Payne. "I wouldn't live in it for all the tea in China." She looked sideways at her husband. "Remember how Vera's mother died suddenly."

"But that, my dear, was proved to be a heart attack," protested Major Payne, tolerantly.

"Yes, and what caused the heart attack? The ghost. That'd give anyone a heart attack."

"I take it you believe in ghosts," said Biggles.

"I believe in this one."

"How do you know about it?"

"It's common talk with the old people in the village."

"What form is the apparition supposed to take?"

"I don't know, but a shadow has been seen and they say there are queer noises in the night. That's why the house was empty for years. It was a ruin when Mrs. Harrington bought it and had it done up. She didn't live long to enjoy it. She herself once told me, and she wasn't a woman to imagine things, that she distinctly heard footsteps; heavy footsteps, in the middle of one stormy night, as if they were made by a man. And they weren't the only noises."

Major Payne stepped in again, somewhat impatiently. "This was a long time ago. Some unauthorized person may have been seen in the house when it was a wreck — a tramp, perhaps, or one of the lads of the village. Vera's never seen anything. She told me so herself on one occasion when the subject came up. The noises were made by mice, or rats, or bats in the thatch. That was why she bought a cat."

"I've heard talk of ghosts but so far I've never seen one," returned Biggles. "Nor have I heard of one being responsible for a death. Most ghost stories have an origin, usually an historical fact. How did this one start?"

Major Payne explained. "The story in the village is, about a hundred and fifty years ago the house was occupied by a notorious smuggler named Nathaniel Binns. I believe there's a record of that in the church register. One night he was caught red-handed by the Excise officers but managed to get back to his house. There he fought it out to the death. He died horribly, cursing everyone, including the Almighty. That's the story. His ghost is said to haunt the place, trying to hide the contraband kegs of brandy he'd brought in."

"A fascinating tale," averred Biggles. "Blood and brandy always go well together. Do you believe it?"

"No. It's an old wives' yarn. Mind you, I believe it's true that a professional smuggler by the name of Binns did live in the house at one time, and for all I know he may have died there. But I'd say the rest is legend, which as usual has lost nothing in the telling from one generation to another. Mrs. Harrington wouldn't have stayed in the house, and Miss Lewis, who is as nervous as a kitten, wouldn't have remained in the place five minutes, had there been anything sinister about it."

"That sounds more like the English of it," agreed Biggles. "We can forget about Mr. Binns, and his alleged ghost, as far as Vera is concerned. I can't see a self-possessed young woman like that being scared to death by anything."

There was a short silence.

Biggles went on: "You know, we're still being a bit premature in talking as if it were known definitely that Vera was murdered. The final post mortem will probably reveal a natural cause of death."

"I hope so, for young Paul's sake," said Major Payne. "And for the sake of his parents. You can imagine the sort of state they're in."

"Where's Paul now?"

"In his room. He refuses to come down. I'm having to send his meals up to him. With the staff problem as it is that's a bit of a nuisance."

"I'm not surprised he doesn't want to be seen in public," muttered Captain Gower. "He's getting what's been coming to him for a long time. Insolent young devil. Those sort of people usually have their chickens come home to roost."

"Oh, pipe down, skipper," requested Biggles impatiently, and with that the party broke up.

The remainder of the day passed quietly. Captain Gower did not join Biggles for the customary evening chat, possibly because he resented the criticism of his deductions.

CHAPTER VII

CONFESSION BY MOONLIGHT

Night fell, warm, still and silent; a brooding silence that seemed to be falling from the heavens in which the moon had not yet shown its face. Everything might have forgotten to breathe in the shock of seeing death intrude where normally peace and contentment reigned. Only the sea, never entirely at rest, sighed a monotonous lament upon the beach.

Biggles sat on the terrace, alone, unconscious of the passing of time, staring with unseeing eyes into the darkness as he strove to untangle the web of mystery in which inevitably he found himself involved. Around his feet lay the ends of the many cigarettes he had smoked, without being aware of it, in his profound examination of such evidence as had come to light.

The one unassailable fact was that Vera Harrington was dead. But how she had died, by whose hand and for what possible reason, although accusing fingers were already pointing in more directions than one, no man could say. He had considered suicide, but did not entertain the thought for long. That a young and apparently carefree girl should destroy herself was even harder to believe than that someone had taken her life. He had also dismissed the possibility of accident for lack of evidence to support it.

He would have liked a few words with Miss Lewis before she left the village, for he felt there was always a chance that in her statement, in her distressed state of mind, she might have overlooked some detail, no matter how trifling, that would throw a ray of light where at present all was gloom. But to question Vera's maid without the permission of the Superintendent in charge of the case would have been a breach of faith as well as etiquette; and such a request he dare not make for fear it would be taken as interference in what was really no concern of his—anyway, no official concern. But he would not have been human had he been able to ignore a matter that had become the one topic of conversation, not only in the hotel but in the district. This was understandable, for nothing arouses morbid excitement more quickly than the grim word murder. No word travels faster or strikes more deeply into the heart of human thought and imagination.

Perhaps the inquest, or even the following day when the Superintendent might have advance knowledge of the result of the autopsy, would put an end to surmise and insidious speculation.

Yet even if that revealed the cause of death to be by poison—and from the absence of marks of physical violence on the girl's body it was hard to see how she could have been done to death in any other way the problem of the motive would remain. Who could wish her dead? To what end? What had anyone to gain? Revenge, of course, seeks no reward other than satisfaction. Revenge for what?

Biggles had looked at this from every possible angle but was unable to convince himself that in this lay the answer; at all events, as far as any person known to him was concerned.

The moon, a silver sabre, crept up over the horizon. He yawned. It was long after his normal bedtime, a fact that was brought to his notice by an empty cigarette case. He looked at the hotel. No light showed, making it evident that most people, if not all, had retired for the night.

As he tossed aside the stub of his last cigarette and slowly rose to follow them, a slight sound not far away told him he had been mistaken in supposing that he alone remained outside the doors of the hotel. The sound seemed to come from the yard at the rear, where the cars, by reason of the fine weather, were left parked in the open.

Thinking of his own car Biggles moved silently and quickly to the yard to see who was doing what. Reaching his objective he saw a car, which he recognized as Paul's Jaguar, being pushed towards the exit by a figure which he did not doubt was the owner. The lights had not been switched on, and the significance of this, together with the fact that the car was being pushed instead of the engine being started, was obvious.

With his rubber-soled beach shoes making no sound on the gravel Biggles walked on until he was nearly within touching distance of the pusher, whom he was now able to identify as the man he had supposed.

"What are you doing?" he asked. He spoke softly, but Paul sprang round with a sharp intake of breath.

"Oh it's you," he muttered, in a surly voice.

"Who did you think it was?" inquired Biggles. "Never mind. I said what are you doing?"

"Can't you see?"

"I just wanted to be sure."

"All right, if you must know. I'm off."

"Off where?"

"Anywhere. I don't know and I don't care. Anywhere to get away from this place. I've had enough."

"Of what?"

"Of being thought by everyone to be a murderer."

"Not everyone. Didn't the Superintendent tell you not to leave the hotel?"

"He did. But I'm not yet under arrest so he can't give me orders."

"So you've decided to do a bolt."

"I have, and you can't stop me, so don't try."

"Do your people know?"

"No."

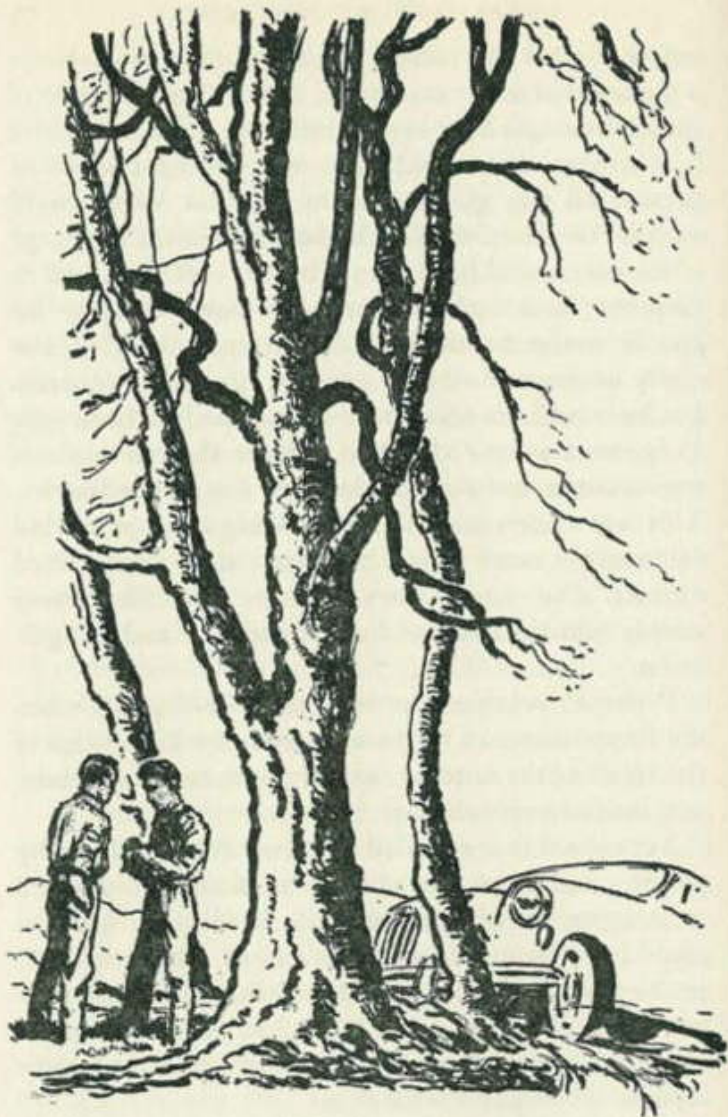
Biggles sighed. "Well, what you do is up to you, but let me give you a piece of advice. Don't do it. You can't escape trouble by running away from it. Sooner or later it catches up with you; and in this case that wouldn't take long. Don't you realize that by going you'll only make your position worse?"

That *would* give the gossips reason to believe you had something to do with Vera's death."

"You talk like a copper yourself," sneered Paul.

"As a matter of fact I am one."

Paul stopped pushing the car, hesitated a few seconds, and then turned face to face. The wan moonlight fell on him. He looked miserable and his eyes were puffy as if he had been crying. "It's only a question of time before they arrest me on a charge of killing Vera," he muttered. "My God! As if I would. I loved her. I'd have died for her. And if it isn't bad enough that she's dead I'm accused of killing her." Paul's voice was harsh and stringent with bitterness.



*"It's only a question of time before they arrest me on a charge
of killing Vera"*

"I'm not accusing you. But let's have this straight. Did you kill her?"

"No. I know nothing about it."

"Then all you have to do is tell the truth and stick to it. While you do that with a clear conscience you've nothing to fear."

"I've nothing to hide."

“Good. Mind if I ask you a few questions?”

“Why?”

“I may be able to help.”

“How can you help?”

“I said just now I was a copper, and so I am, but not the sort you would naturally suppose. Actually—keep this under your hat—when I’m not here I’m a detective at Scotland Yard.”

“So that’s it. Why keep it a secret?”

“Because I’d rather the Superintendent in charge of the case didn’t know I’d told you, or even that I’d been talking to you. He might not like it. He knows who and what I am, but being a bit touchy he might think I’m poking my nose in where it isn’t wanted.”

“What are you doing here?”

“I’m on holiday. You say you know nothing about how Vera died. Very well. Let’s see if we can find some way of proving it. Suppose we sit in the car and have a chat—eh?”

“All right, if you think it’ll do any good.”

“I make one condition.”

“What is it?”

“That you tell me the absolute truth. If you don’t do that I shall be wasting my time. Remember, it’s in your own interest. I’ve nothing to gain, or lose—except my beauty sleep.”

“All right.”

They got in the car, Paul in the driving seat and Biggles beside him.

“You start,” invited Paul.

“I’m puzzled about one or two things so I’m going to ask you some questions. If, as you say, your conscience is clear, there’s no reason why you shouldn’t give me the right answers, is there?”

“I suppose not.”

“You only suppose?”

“Go on. I’ll give you the answers.”

“First of all will you explain this. When you went to the Thatched House you were wearing leather gloves—remember? You left them there. It was a hot night. Why did you wear gloves?”

“They were my driving gloves. They were in the car.”

“That was no reason why you should put them on.”

“I didn’t want to prick my fingers on the thorns of the roses I was taking to Vera.”

“Weren’t they properly wrapped up?”

“No. As I had only a short distance to go there seemed no reason to go to that trouble.”

“Fair enough. That answers that. You stayed with Vera about half an hour.”

“That’s right.”

"Where did you say good-night to her?"

"Does it matter?"

"It might. Little things can add up to big ones."

"She saw me off at the front porch."

"Did she seem all right then?"

"Perfectly all right."

"You had no quarrel, or anything like that?"

"Certainly not."

"Having said good night she went back indoors?"

"Yes. She locked and bolted the door after me."

"How do you know that?"

"I heard her as I walked down the path."

"Good. Then obviously you couldn't have got back in."

"Of course not. I had no reason to, anyway."

"When you arrived Miss Lewis let you in."

"Yes."

"Was she surprised to see you?"

"No. They'd been expecting me. Vera knew I was going to Truro because I asked her if she'd care to come. She wouldn't, so I promised to bring her some roses. She loves roses. She has none worth while in her garden and I often take her some."

"I see. Where was Vera when you joined her?"

"In the sitting-room, eating strawberries. She had a basket on the couch beside her. She asked me to have some but I said no because we get too many at the hotel. I put the roses and the chocolates on the table and sat beside her. We talked for a bit and then she asked me if I'd care for a glass of sherry. I said yes so she got up and poured out two glasses at the sideboard. Then she opened the box of chocolates and we each had one or two. After that we sat talking."

"What about?"

"Nothing in particular—who was at the hotel, what fine weather it was, how Mrs. Payne had kindly sent her the strawberries and Mick Trelawny had brought in a brace of pollack—that sort of thing. I sat with her until she pointed at the time. I took the hint. She saw me to the porch. She said she would put the roses in water and then go to bed. That's about all I can tell you."

"Just one more thing. Let's go back to the time you finished your dinner and walked up the road to the Thatched House. That would mean you left the hotel—at what time, say?"

"Half past nine."

"And you reached the house at ten."

"Near enough."

"You're quite sure of this?"

"Of course."

"You say you left Vera at ten-thirty precisely?"

"Yes."

"And you got back to the hotel at twenty to eleven when you said good night to your people."

"Yes."

"Now tell me this, Paul. How was it that it took you half an hour to walk to Vera's house and only ten minutes to walk back?"

For the first time there was just the slightest hesitation, which Biggles did not fail to notice. "The way there was uphill. It was downhill coming home."

"Agreed. But to a young fellow like you that would hardly account for such a difference in time. Half an hour to get there and ten minutes to walk back? No, Paul, that won't do, as you'll find if ever you are asked that question in court. Did you stop to speak to someone?"

"No."

"Did you see anyone?"

"No. I swear it."

"Did you stop anywhere at all?"

Again the momentary hesitation. "No."

Biggles sighed and moved as if he was about to get out of the car. "All right Paul. Have it your way. But if you're not going to tell me the truth it's no use going on. You're hiding something, and unless I know what it is we shan't get anywhere."

"All right. I did stop on the way."

"That's better. Where did you stop, and why?"

"I stopped at Doctor Venner's garden."

Biggles stared. "What on earth for?"

"To pick one or two roses for Vera."

"But you said you bought them on the road between here and Truro!"

"I know I did, but that wasn't true, I intended to get them in Truro but forgot. Having promised them I couldn't go without them. I couldn't tell Vera I'd forgotten her roses."

"So you decided to pinch a few from the Doctor's garden."

"Why not? He's got plenty. You can see them from the road, just inside the gate. He's a cantankerous old devil, anyway."

"Who says so?"

"I do. Everyone says so. He was rude to Vera when she asked him for a subscription for the Flower Show."

"Don't think I'm making excuses for him, but in approaching him Vera must have been prepared for a rebuff, knowing how he felt about the Flower Show and that he'd refused to take any part in it."

"He needn't have been rude."

"Even if he was, that didn't justify you in raiding his garden for the roses which you'd forgotten to buy in Truro."

"I'd have asked him to give me a few, or sell me some, if I'd thought there

was the slightest chance of him saying yes. I only took half a dozen. He wouldn't miss 'em."

"But I can't understand why you thought it necessary to lie about it."

"Be reasonable. How could I say I'd pinched the roses from the garden next door? It seemed of no importance then, or now if it comes to that, where the roses came from."

"You knew what you were going to do when you left the hotel, didn't you? That's why you put on your gloves."

"Of course. Roses have thorns, and you can scratch your hands cutting them in daylight, never mind in the dark. I had to cut them with my nail scissors. Does it matter?"

"It didn't matter at the time, perhaps, but it might matter now because you've provided the police with an excuse to call you a liar; and a court might take the view that a man capable of telling one lie might tell more if it suited him."

"I see that now, but how was I to know what was going to happen? If Vera hadn't died no one would have known anything about it, and the question would never have arisen."

"Unfortunately she did die, and you, very foolishly, left a flaw in your statement to the police, which may or may not be noticed."

"You won't tell them?" pleaded Paul desperately.

"No, I shan't tell them. They can work it out for themselves. But if it comes to a showdown you'll have to face up to it and tell the truth."

"I can see that now."

"Have you any idea at all of how Vera died?"

"None whatever. But I'll say this on my dying oath. That bottle of cyanide the police found in my room had nothing to do with it. I haven't seen it for months. It's only necessary to refresh a killing-jar once in a blue moon."

"And you've nothing more to tell me?"

"Not a thing. Now you know the worst. It's a bit hard, you must admit. For taking some presents to a girl I'm likely to be accused of murdering her."

"We can talk about that if and when it happens. Meanwhile, don't make things look worse by running away. Put the car back in its usual place and go to bed. That's where I'm going. I didn't reckon on having a busman's holiday."

"I'll do as you say."

"That's more like it. Good night."

Biggles got out of the car and walked away with something more to think about.

CHAPTER VIII

NO NINTH LIFE FOR A CAT

The next morning Biggles had his usual dip and after breakfast waited on the terrace in the hope that the Superintendent would come and perhaps bring an early report on the autopsy. This might be enough to settle the problem once and for all.

He got up when the police car ran in and stopped. The Superintendent got out and walked briskly to the terrace.

"I'm really on my way to have another word with Miss Lewis and a last look round the cottage before she packs up," he said. "Seeing you here I thought I'd give you an item of news that should interest you."

"That was a kind thought."

"The preliminary report of the post mortem says no trace of cyanide, so it looks as if you might be right in your opinion of young Graveson after all. Furthermore, there's no indication so far of any other common poison, one such as a member of the public might be able to get hold of—arsenic, strychnine, for instance. The odd thing is, though, there are certain signs consistent with death from poisoning. It's got the doctors guessing. Beats me, I'm damned if I know what to make of it. I can't believe this to be a case of accidental death, but it's no use expecting a coroner's jury to bring in any other verdict without evidence."

"No symptoms of heart trouble?"

"None whatever. The chief pathologist says that from his first examination the girl appears to have a perfectly healthy body in every respect."

"So you still have no idea of why she died?"

"Not a glimmer."

"Queer."

"Queer! I'll say it's queer. I've never struck a case like it. At ten o'clock that girl was alive and well. By eleven she was dead. She didn't just lie down and die for no reason at all."

Biggles smiled wanly. "No one is likely to argue with you on that score."

"I can't get the feeling out of my bones that she was murdered. But how? In every other murder case I've handled that was a problem that didn't arise. We did at least know how the victim was done in. Up to now the doctors haven't been able to help us. They're still working on the case so it may be a bit early to say they're baffled. There's still a chance something may turn up. The answer must be here, but I'm damned if I know where to look for it." The Superintendent cocked an eye. "You got any ideas?"

"No. The thing is just as much a mystery to me as it is to you."

"Ha! So we've even got the Yard guessing. I reckon you've given the matter some thought?"

“A certain amount. I won’t say I’ve knocked my plan out, because I was fully prepared for you to look in this morning to say you had information that had got everything buttoned up. Instead, you now tell me we’re back where we started.”

“How far did you get?”

“Not very far, I’m afraid. But remember, I told you I wouldn’t interfere, so for the most part my activities have been confined to this chair.”

“What lines have you been thinking on?”

“The old method of sifting out what was impossible and turning the spotlight on what remained. There was one basic fact. Vera Harrington was dead. Broadly speaking that could only have happened in one of four ways. Which one was it? Death from natural causes, suicide, accident or murder. I started with suicide because that seemed the easiest to dispose of. I ruled it out because I just could not see how Vera could have destroyed herself—anyhow, in a house of that size— without leaving a clear indication of how it was done. Secondly, to me it didn’t make sense that she should suddenly break off in the middle of doing a simple household job, namely, arranging a vase of flowers, in order to kill herself. So suicide was out. You now tell me the doctors say she didn’t die from a natural cause, so that’s out, too. Assuming we’re correct so far, and we’re bound to work on that assumption, we’re left with only accident and murder.”

“What about murder?”

“I considered the possibility of this being one of those really clever murders that are never recognized as such, the victim going to the grave under an ordinary death certificate. As you know, just as many murders go undiscovered as are exposed for what they are. Was this one of them, only somehow the plot had come unstuck, death coming more quickly than was intended and in a way that was certain to call for an enquiry? But here we run into an absence of motive, which is always a snag.”

“I’ve been thoroughly into that, as you can imagine. But far from anyone wishing her ill Vera seems to have been the most popular girl in the village. As far as anyone hating the girl to the point of wanting to kill her—it’s out of the question. If she had an enemy, in a place this size everyone would know it. It would be impossible to keep a thing like that quiet.”

“You’re talking about the village; and that’s all right as far as it goes. But what about London? I have no details but I’m told she worked there for a time. Why did she pack up and come home? She said because she preferred life in the country. That could be true. But did she get into some trouble there? Did she make an enemy? In short, is there a factor in this case which we know nothing about?”

“I’ll go into that. Miss Lewis might be able to tell me. She’d know. But what did you make of the possibility of accident?”

“Nothing. It’s as difficult to point the case of an accident as it is to find a motive for murder.”

“Dammit all. It must have been one or the other.”

“I shall be interested to hear which it was, when you’re able to tell me.”

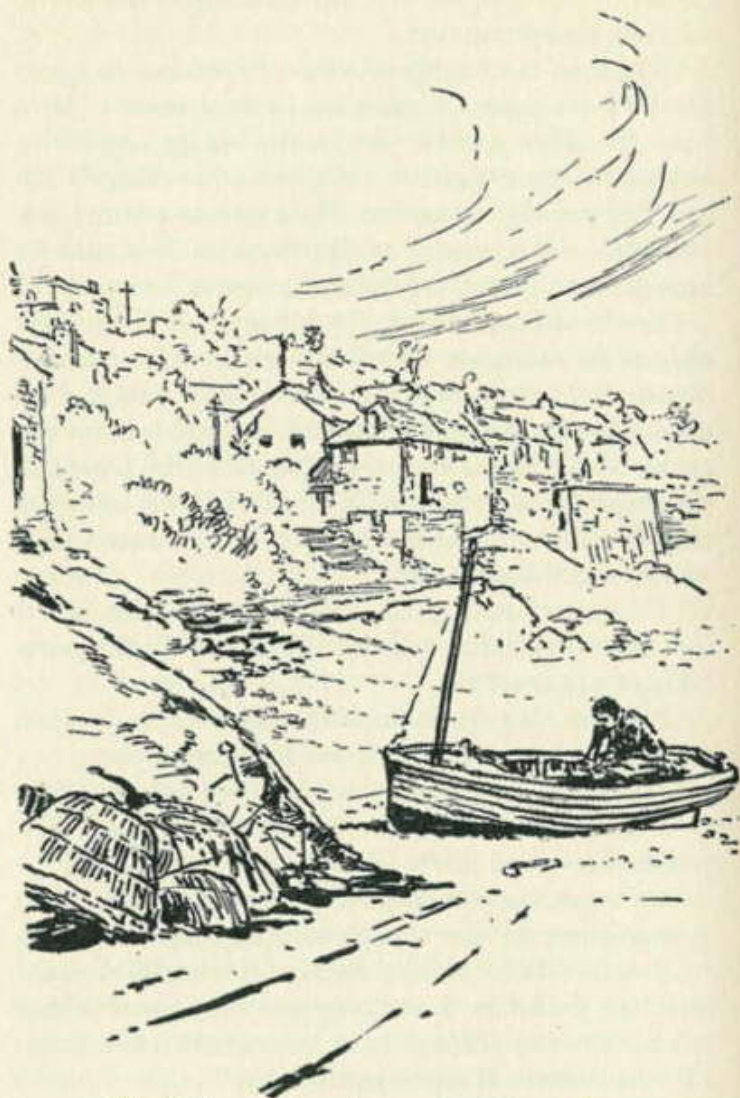
The Superintendent looked at his watch. “I must be getting along to the cottage, I told Miss Lewis I’d run her into Truro if she’d finished tidying up. I could then lock the house. I don’t suppose the poor old thing will want to stay there an hour longer than is necessary. I’ll let you know if anything turns up.”

“Okay, Chief. Thanks.”

After the police car had gone Biggles set off for his customary stroll along the beach; but on this occasion he went farther than usual, making for a minor headland that bulged out of the cliff opposite the far end of the village. This, he had been told, was where Trelawny kept his boat.

He walked slowly, his forehead knit with the intensity of his concentration, aware that his original intention to ignore the local sensation was not working out. But then, in the circumstances, it could hardly be otherwise.

Rounding the headland he found himself looking into a tiny cove, a mere spit of sand. A boulder with a chain attached to it, and some old lobster pots, well above the high water mark, told him this was Trelawny’s mooring. The boat was there, drawn up on the sand. In it the owner sat slumped, his chin in his hands.



The boat was there, drawn up on the sand

Biggles greeted him from a distance in order not to startle him. "Good morning, Mick. Not fishing today?"

Trelawny half looked up. "No."

"What's on your mind?"

"What do you think?"

"You mean this business of Vera."

"I can't get it out of my head. I still can't believe she's dead and I shall never see her again."

"That's how it is with sudden death," came back Biggles, philosophically.

"Have the police found out anything yet?"

"No. They're completely baffled."

"They would be. They're about as much good as a spent lobster."

"Oh, come now, give 'em a chance. Have you any ideas about it?"

"Not one."

"The police are beginning to think she was accidentally poisoned, but they don't know how. Tell me this. Have you ever known anybody to be taken ill with fish poisoning after eating pollack?"

"Never. Pollack ain't everybody's choice of a fish but they're safe enough. I've known people ill from eating shellfish but that's usually the result of not knowing where they came from or how to clean 'em— what to keep and what to chuck away." A thought seemed to strike the fisherman. He looked up.

"Are you thinking about those pollack I took in to Vera?"

"Yes."

"Well you can set your mind at rest on that. Those fish hadn't been out of the water half an hour. They were still alive. And anyway, if Vera had been struck with fish poisoning Miss Lewis would have known all about it."

"It was just an idea."

"Miss Lewis said they'd have the fish for lunch, which means she'd have some, too. I've been sitting here wondering what could have happened. I shall never forgive myself for not going in the house while I was at it, even if it meant forcing the door. I ought to have known something was wrong. Vera might still have been alive."

"Maybe it's a good thing you didn't go in," said Biggles, seriously.

"Where are you making for now?"

"The village. I want to go to the Post Office. I should just have time before lunch. Is there any way I can get there without going all the way back? Did I hear you say something about a way up the cliff?"

He had already surveyed it. It was a typical South Cornish coastline, a bulwark of rugged rock, not very high—perhaps fifty feet—and seldom vertical. More often it leaned back a little, and at such places an ascent appeared to offer no difficulty to anyone with sound limbs. Along the base lay the usual chaos of rock that had fallen through the centuries.

It was true he wanted to go to the Post office but he did not want to walk up the village street and in all probability encounter the Superintendent who had said he was going to collect Miss Lewis. He was still anxious not to be suspected by him of meddling in the affair.

Mick got out of the boat. "There are several ways up when you know 'em. I usually go home that way. It's a short cut."

Together they walked to the face of the cliff..

“Here’s one way,” said Mick, pointing. “This is the way I went up to see why the lights were still on.” He indicated an object at Biggles’ feet. “There’s the fag end I threw down when I started. You need two hands.” For a moment he hesitated as if a thought had occurred to him. “Perhaps it’d be better if you didn’t try that way. It’s a bit tricky in places. There’s an easier one over here.”

He picked a way through the jumble of fallen boulders for a few yards and again raised a pointing finger. “This is a lot easier. You can’t make any mistake. It goes crossways instead of straight up. You can see the way it goes from here. It’ll bring you out at the back of the houses bang opposite the Post Office.”

“Are you coining up?”

“No. I shall have to go round my pots later.”

“Right. Then I’ll be going. Many thanks.”

Biggles started up and without the slightest difficulty reached the top. From the lip he looked down to wave, but Mick was already walking back to his boat. For a few seconds he watched to see if he looked back, but as he did not he walked on a little way to an outcropping boulder, where he sat down and lit a cigarette.

In his brief engagement with the fisherman another question had arisen that seemed to demand an answer. It arose from his principle, that had so often been helpful, of turning a close eye on any behaviour that did not seem quite natural.

Mick had first taken him to the way up the cliff he had used on the night Vera had died. That was not to be doubted because the cigarette he had discarded still lay there, untarnished. He had thrown it down because that particular way up was tricky. It needed two hands. If it was tricky in daylight it would be even more tricky in the dark. Why had he taken the hard way when within a few yards there was a track a child could follow? That might be only a small thing and there was probably a simple explanation; but on the face of it, it seemed a strange thing to do.

There was a secondary point associated with it. It had obviously been Mick’s intention to show him that particular route. He had gone straight to it. Then, suddenly as it seemed, he had changed his mind and had taken him to the route he had actually used. Why? Had he remembered something? Was it true that this was the easier way or had Mick some reason for not wanting him to make the ascent by the track he had used on the night of Vera’s death, apparently the first to come to his mind. Why had he changed his mind? People do not change their minds without a reason. It might be worth investigating.

Biggles got up and looked around. He found himself on an area of rough grass, some twenty to thirty yards wide, a sort of no-man’s-land, between the edge of the cliff and the back gardens of the houses on the seaward side of the village street. Their boundary was marked by a straggling thickset hedge bent inwards by the prevailing wind. Beyond it, no distance away, was the

conspicuous roof of the Thatched House. In the hedge at fairly close intervals were small wooden gates, obviously intended to give the occupants of the houses access to the sea front.

Biggles looked up and down and saw to his satisfaction that he was alone. He did not want to be seen. He had accused Captain Gower of snooping and he was rather uncomfortably aware that he was now about to do the same thing. He had told Mick he was going to the Post Office and he had every intention of doing so, but first he had another object in view. He had only a vague idea of what he was going to do. He was not looking for anything in particular. Nor did he seriously expect to find a clue to the mystery that now occupied his mind. But he had decided to have a look at the Thatched house and the adjacent properties from the rear, for this was something he had never seen. After another glance up and down he walked over to the hedge.

Peering through it he saw not the garden of the Thatched House but the one next door. This was at once evident for Doctor Venner was there, engaged in the common task which all rose growers must undertake if they are to protect their blooms against the ravages of greenfly and other insect pests. With a brass syringe in his hands and a bucket at his feet, he was spraying the standard trees.

Rather than risk being seen playing Peeping Tom Biggles moved on to the garden of the Thatched House, where again he made a surreptitious survey in case the Superintendent was still about; but he could see no sign of him, or Miss Lewis, so he concluded that she was on her way to Truro. He went on to the garden gate for a clearer view.

What he saw was very much as he expected; a piece of rough turf down the middle of which a weedy gravel path ran to the back door. On each side of the turf, backed by a hedge, was a flower border in which a few old-fashioned hardy plants fought a losing battle for existence against an army of more powerful weeds. No attempt had been made at cultivation. Apparently neither Vera nor her maid had much time for the more laborious tasks of gardening. The Doctor's garden had been bright and gay with roses, but here, as Paul Graveson had said, there were none.

Just inside the gate, a little to one side, under a wind-distorted pine was a dump of vegetable and garden refuse, long dead flowers, cabbage leaves and the like, thrown down in a heap. There appeared to be nothing else of interest, nothing worth a closer investigation, so he turned away and walked along the top of the cliff to the extremity of the hedge where he found a narrow footpath cutting between the houses to the village street. His first thought was for the Superintendent, but he couldn't see the police car so he assumed it had been and gone, taking Miss Lewis with it.

Standing outside the Post Office were two women talking to Mrs. Hayward. They fell silent at his approach.

"Has Miss Lewis gone?" he asked.

The postmistress answered. "Not yet."

“How’s that? I thought the police car came for her.”

“It did. But she wasn’t quite ready. She still had one or two things to do, so rather than wait the car’s coming back for her later.”

“I see.”

“Did you want something?”

“Only one or two postcards and some stamps.”

Having got what he wanted Biggles returned to the hotel, arriving as the gong for lunch was sounded.

In the dining-room he found some of the holiday guests had gone and one or two new ones had arrived; but of those who were concerning themselves with the local tragedy he saw only Captain Gower, who sat at a table by himself. They did not speak. None of the Gravesons had yet appeared in public.

He had his lunch, and afterwards went out to his usual chair on the terrace, from where, presently, he saw Gower walking up the hill to the village. He thought nothing of it, content to be alone and so able to do some intensive thinking without being interrupted by Gower’s irresponsible speculations.

However, about half an hour later he saw him coming back, carrying his hat and walking at a pace that suggested he was the bearer of news. He came straight to the terrace, and dropping into the chair next to Biggles mopped a perspiring brow.

“Phew! It’s hot,” he complained.

“A man of your age should take time,” chided Biggles. “What’s the rush?”

“You won’t believe this,” declared Gower, cogently.



“Suppose you tell me what it is and leave me to decide.”

"It's Vera's cat."

"What about it?"

"It's dead."

"So what? Cats have often been known to die."

"Not as this one died," breathed Gower, mysteriously.

"How do you know?"

"I saw the whole thing."

"You mean, you actually saw the cat die?"

"I certainly did, and I shan't forget it in a hurry."

"Run over, I suppose."

"Nothing like it. I happened to be standing at the door of the Post Office, which as you know is practically opposite the Thatched House, having a chat with Mrs. Hayward—"

"What you mean is, your morbid curiosity took you to where you could watch the house and gossip at the same time."

"Nothing of the sort."

"No matter. Let it pass. What did you see?"

"I saw Vera's cat coming down the path—"

"What path?"

"Vera's path. That bit of crazy paving that leads to the front door. I spotted right away there was something wrong with it. I said to Mrs. Hayward: 'Look at that cat! What's it doing?'"

"What was it doing?"

"With its fur on end it was walking stiff legged, staring straight in front of it. Once it swerved as if it didn't know where it was going. Reaching the road it stopped and staggered. It took a few more steps and then sank down. I went across. It was dead. If that cat wasn't poisoned I'll eat my hat."

"Okay. So it was poisoned. It wouldn't be the first country cat to get hold of a dose of rat poison."

Gower stared. "Doesn't it occur to you that this ties up with my poison theory, and the poison being found in Paul's room?"

"It occurs to me that it might be nothing more than coincidence."

"Coincidence!"

"Paul certainly didn't poison the cat because he hasn't been out."

"Then he hasn't been arrested."

"No."

"That Paul hasn't been out makes no difference," argued Gower, doggedly. "That cat must in some way have got hold of some of the same poison that killed Vera."

"Did the Superintendent see this?"

"No. Why should he?"

"I thought he might have been there. He was coming over again this afternoon to fetch Miss Lewis and take her to Truro, so that he could lock up the house."

“That’s what they tell me. He hasn’t been yet. At least, he hadn’t been when I was there.”

“Did you see Miss Lewis?”

“No.”

“Didn’t anyone tell her about the cat?”

“No. Mrs. Hayward thought it better not to tell her, in the state she’s in. The Superintendent can break it to her gently when he comes. She’ll have to know, because she’d naturally reckon to take the cat with her when she leaves. The cat’s in Mrs. Hayward’s back yard.”

“You seem to have had an exciting afternoon,” said Biggles, with mild sarcasm.

“I haven’t finished yet.” Gower took a furtive glance around, either to enlarge on the importance of what he was going to say or to make sure he couldn’t be overheard.

“What’s this? More gossip?” guessed Biggles.

“You can call it that if you like, but it’s given me something to think about. This morning I was up in the village and happened to see Tom Hardy standing at the door of his pub; so I went along and asked him if he knew the truth about this yarn of the Thatched House being haunted. He’s lived here for years, and his father before him. So he’d know, if anyone did. Do you know what he told me?”

“I wouldn’t try to guess.”

“Now then, what do you make of this?” Gower leaned forward, very confidential.

“I’m prepared to believe anything.”

“He said he didn’t know about a ghost but more than once he’d seen a shadow moving about in the house, passing the window. Once, after dark, he saw a sort of light flash, just for a second.”

“As far as my limited information goes ghosts don’t normally carry lights. They seem to be able to see in the dark.”

Gower ignored the interruption. “Admittedly, this was some time ago, before Mrs. Harrington moved in. Hardy’s grandfather told him—now you listen to this— there used to be a rumour that Nat Binns, the smuggler, had a secret entrance that enabled him to get in and out of the house when the Excise men were laying for him.”

“That must have been handy,” acknowledged Biggles, a trifle flippantly.

“Don’t you see what that means?”

“What does it mean?”

“Obviously, it means that anyone knowing the trick could have got into the house, murdered Vera, and gone out without a soul knowing anything about it.”

“An interesting theory,” conceded Biggles. “There’s at least one thing against it.”

“What’s that?”

“Vera, living in the house, would have known of this secret passage and done something about it. She wouldn’t need such a device and she would see to it that no one else could walk in and out at any odd time.”

Gower scowled. “You’re a lot of help,” he grumbled. “Why do you have to try to squash every idea I put forward? It’s time someone did some intelligent thinking.”

“You know, skipper, as I’ve told you before, you’ve been reading too many thrillers. I’m still waiting for proof that Vera was murdered.”

Captain Gower got up. “All right. You’re so damn clever, work it out yourself. You have it your way and I’ll stick to mine, and at the finish we’ll see who’s right.” He marched off into the hotel.

Biggles lit a cigarette.

CHAPTER IX

STRANGE INTERLUDE

BIGGLES sat still for a minute, turning over in his mind what Captain Gower had told him; then, looking out to sea, observing Trelawny's boat, the patched sail of which he had come to know well, making for the promontory around which he set most of his lobster pots, he was reminded of the curious incident of the two tracks up the face of the cliff. Why had Mick suddenly changed his mind? He had still been unable to think of a satisfactory explanation. The absence of the fisherman provided an opportunity for a reconnaissance without hurting the man's feelings by implying what he had said was not true.

Wherefore Biggles set off at a brisk pace along the beach for the little cove where Trelawny kept his boat. The distance was well under a mile and in ten minutes he was there, noticing on the way that what little breeze there was had veered a few points and was now coming from a direction that might bring a change of weather. The cove looked just the same as when he had last seen it, except of course the boat was not there and the tide had ebbed a little.

Without stopping he made for the base of the cliff, at the point where Mick had thrown down his cigarette, and forthwith started to climb. The first few yards were a little awkward, enough probably to deter a stranger from attempting it; but beyond that the ascent, although a little steeper since it went directly to the top, was as easy as the route he had taken. Each step and handhold was plain to see. What, therefore, had been Mick's purpose in discouraging him? he asked himself as he went on up.

He found the answer, or assumed he had, about twenty feet below the top. Had he not been looking for something—although he had no idea for what—it was unlikely that he would have noticed it; but all the way up he had been on the watch for anything that might explain Mick's lie, or what now appeared to be a lie, about the difficulty of that particular route.

What he saw, a short distance away on the left-hand side, was a rusty iron hook embedded in the rock. It had obviously been there for a long time but there was nothing extraordinary about that. What was its purpose? If this was what Mick hadn't wanted him to see, why not? A narrow ledge enabled him to reach it without much risk of falling, and then he thought he had found the answer.

Below the hook was a fissure, a fault in the rock it seemed, just large enough for a man to enter. He did so, and in so doing kicked an object on the ground that fell with a metallic rattle. Looking down he saw that it was an old oil-burning hurricane lamp. He picked it up and shook it. A little oil splashed in the container. The purpose of the hook was explained. It was to carry the lamp when occasion required it. He observed that when suspended the light

would be seen from one direction only— directly out to sea. It was, he reasoned, Mick's private lighthouse. Well, there was nothing wrong with that, and there appeared to be no reason why he, or anyone else, shouldn't see it. Why the secrecy?

Beyond, all was in utter darkness. He flicked on his petrol lighter, the only means he had of producing a flame, and lit the lamp. Holding it up he saw at once that the fissure was a cave of some dimensions. It invited exploration. The floor, plain rock, rough and uneven, rose slightly. Stalactites and stalagmites, any that would impede progress having been broken off, made it clear that the cavern was a natural formation of great age. The fact that obstructions had been cleared also made it evident that the place had been used in fairly modern times, if not recently. Water dripped with the methodical regularity of a clock ticking.

Holding the lamp high he advanced, cautiously, determined to see his discovery through to the end. Of one thing he was now certain. Mick knew all about this, but for some reason he didn't want him to see it. The automatic question was, why not?

The cave ran in farther than Biggles had expected, gradually becoming larger. It was not easy to judge distance in such conditions but he estimated he had covered not much less than a hundred yards when he came within sight of the end. The passage had been fairly straight but he realized it must have curved a little because he could no longer see the entrance, or even reflected daylight.

The cave was largest at the end, or as far as it was possible to go. It ended abruptly at a face of rock some seven or eight feet high above which was a narrow cavity in the manner of a low gallery. In the roughly square chamber that formed the terminus there were ample signs of occupation, most of them recent. In the middle was a box, an ordinary wooden packing case, bottom up to form a table. It still bore its original label, 'Canary Islands Potatoes'. On it, in a bottle, was a candle. Around this lay some skeins of fishing lines, a number of hooks and a jack-knife. On one side of the table an ancient keg stood on end apparently to form a seat. On the other side was another plain wooden box, another seat. On the floor lay a heap of cordage, and against the wall an object that puzzled him, for he could think of no possible reason for it. It was a short wooden ladder which closer examination revealed to be old and rotten with age. Its condition suggested it had not been used for some time.

Biggles lit the candle and sitting on the keg tried to work it out. So this was it. This was what Mick hadn't wanted him to see. Why? Try as he would he could not see how the cave could have any possible connexion with what had led him to it, the death of Vera Harrington.

Time passed. He sat on, smoking one cigarette after another, pondering this revelation, not so much because the place was there and in use, for there was nothing particularly remarkable in that, as the reason why Mick hadn't wanted him to see it. Of that he was sure, for he could think of no other way to

account for the fisherman's behaviour. He sat with his eyes on the ground. His expression changed as they focused on a small white object. It was a cigarette end, one of several. But they were not all like this. He examined it closely to make sure he was not mistaken. He saw he was not. It bore the unmistakable mark of lipstick.

Biggles frowned. Whose lipstick? Vera Harrington's? Was that the answer to Mick's behaviour? He did not overlook the fact that there were other girls in the village, some of whom no doubt used lipstick.

He was jerked from his soliloquy by a sound that came from the direction of the entrance. He stiffened, listening intently, and heard soft footsteps approaching, sometimes crunching on the brittle, broken pieces of stalactite. With no retreat he could only wait. He did not move. He didn't put out the candle for there seemed no point in it. He preferred to be able to see his visitor.

The footsteps came right up, and into the circle of light cast by the candle stepped Mick Trelawny. He regarded Biggles without surprise. "So it's you," he said dispassionately, with a shadow of a smile—much to Biggles' relief, for he thought there might be trouble.

Mick sat on the box and lit a cigarette. "How did you find it?"

"I saw the hook."

"What were you doing?"

"I had a fancy to do some more climbing. The way you sent me this morning was easy. I thought I'd try the harder way. Actually I didn't find it any more difficult."

"That's because you didn't go on to the top. There's a bit of an overhang and no foothold. You have to reach up with your hands and pull yourself up. That ain't so easy."

"You're back early from your pots."

"The wind was swinging towards the quarter that often brings bad weather. I turned back and saw someone going up the cliff. I thought it was you but decided make sure."

"What do you use this place for—a sort of secret hideout?"

"Not altogether. When the weather's rough and there's no moon I still hang out the lamp to show me the way in. When the weather's too bad to go out I often come in here to make up my lines of hooks. It's more comfortable than my old shack, which lets in the wind and the rain. It's always warm in here and you can't hear the wind, so I'm pretty snug. Of course, this cave was used long before my time. Been used for countless ages mebbe. I found it years ago, when I was little more than a kid, looking for gulls' eggs along the cliff. That old keg you're sitting on now was there then. I reckon it had rum in it at one time. Nat Binns knew what he was doing when he built the Thatched House."

"Did he build it?"

"I dunno for sure, but I've an idea he did. He seems to have been a

smuggler in a big way.”

“So I’ve been told.”

“He lived in the Thatched House, anyway, and this was his bolt hole. That’s why it took the Customs men so long to catch up with him.”

“But I don’t understand. What has the Thatched House to do with the cave?”

Mick raised his eyebrows. “Don’t you realise where you are? But then, of course, you wouldn’t.”

“I don’t get it. Where am I?” asked Biggles, wonderingly.

Mick looked amused. “You’re sitting slap under the house.”

“Good Lor’!”

“Now you see how the place got the reputation of being haunted. Mind you, it was some time before I realized that any noise down here could be heard up above. Even footsteps. Because it’s hollow, I suppose.”

“But there’s talk of shadows being seen in the house.”

Mick laughed softly. “That was me. I was the ghost.”

“You mean, you used to go into the house?”

“Occasionally. Not very often. This of course was when the house was empty. It was empty for years. I sometimes went up into it because I could see better to mend my tackle. It saved candles, too. Someone must have seen me from the road. I didn’t care if they did. I wasn’t doing any harm.”

Biggles was staring. “So it’s true.”

“What’s true.”

“That Nat Binns had a secret way in and out of the house. I heard something about that, but took it to be a fanciful piece of romancing by some joker with imagination.”

“It’s true all right. This is it.”

“Let me get this right. You’re saying there really is direct communication between this cave and the house?”

“That’s it. Or there used to be in Nat Binns’ time, and long after. All you had to do was put that bit of a ladder against the wall over there to get up to the ledge which you can see. Crawl a few yards and there is, or used to be, a trap door. It came out under the stairs by the kitchen. Many a time Nat Binns must have sat here smoking his pipe and having a tot o’ brandy while the Customs men were waiting for him to come in. Down here he could hear every sound they made. Hear ‘em talking, too, no doubt. Listening, he’d know when it was safe for him to move out.”

Biggles hesitated before asking the next question. “Can you still get in and out of the house that way?”

“No. Not any longer.”

“Why not?”

“Because the trap door’s gone. You see, when Mrs. Harrington bought the place she had it properly done up. The floor was rotten with dry rot and she had a new one laid. Oak boards. So the trap door disappeared.”

“What did the workmen think when they found it, as they must have done?”

“They thought it was a way down to a disused cellar, or perhaps an old well. They never went down to see. I was there. I used to hang about while they were working, to watch. I saw ‘em nail down the new floor and that put an end to my getting into the house. Not that I could have gone in, anyway, with folks living there.”

Biggles flicked the ash off his cigarette. “Then tell me, Mick, how did Vera get in here?”

It was Mick’s turn to stare. “Now how the hell did you know that?”

“I didn’t know. I was guessing.” Biggles opened his hand and showed the cigarette stub still in it. “I hadn’t noticed you using lipstick.”

Mick grinned. “You should have been a copper. Yes, Vera’s been in here, but she came in through the front door.”

“When was this?”

“Oh, months ago,”

“Funny place to bring a girl, wasn’t it?”

“Oh, I don’t know. She wanted to come.”

“Then she knew about it?”

“I’ll tell you how it happened. One day we were talking and she brought up the subject of the house being haunted—or supposed to be. I told her it was a lot of nonsense and she needn’t worry herself about that. She’d never be likely to see or hear anything. She asked me how I knew, so I told her I was the ghost and how the story had got around. She wouldn’t believe it; thought I was only trying to set her mind at rest; so I told her I could prove it, and if she liked she could see the place for herself. Well, she wanted to see it so one day I brought her along. She sat on the keg you’re sitting on now. She saw the funny side of it and laughed her head off. I told her not to tell anyone, and as far as I know she never did. But she might have done.”

“She must have had a lot of confidence in you to come to a place like this.”

“Why not? She knew she was safe enough with me. That girl wasn’t short of nerve. She’d come out with me in the boat, to go round the pots, in any sort of weather. One day we were caught in a squall. I wasn’t too happy myself, for that old boat of mine ain’t as sound as she used to be. We were wet to the skin. Not daring to hoist sail I had to row, and while I rowed she baled. And while she baled she sang. That’s the sort of girl she was. Now she’s gone. I shall never be happy again till they hang the swine who did it.”

“You didn’t want me to find this place, did you?”

“Put it like this. You’ll understand I didn’t want the police to know there’d ever been a way of getting into the house without going through the doors. They might have thought I could still get in, and while I knew this had nothing to do with Vera’s death it might have led to some awkward questions.”

“You’re right there. It would.”

"After all, if ever I wanted to murder anyone what better place than this?"

"It would certainly be just the job."

"You won't tell anyone?" Mick asked the question anxiously.

"Not me. You've been very frank about all this and I appreciate it. Now answer me this question. Have you ever been into the house, since Mrs. Harrington took possession, without going through the doors?"

"Never. And I ain't never in my life been upstairs in the house."

"Why did you take the hard way up the cliff, as you yourself have admitted, the night Vera died?"

"Because it was the shortest way and I was in a hurry. I've done the trip a thousand times so there was no danger in it for me. When you get over the top you find yourself right opposite Vera's back garden gate. I can see what you're driving at. Forget it, I'd have jumped off the top of the cliff rather than see that dear girl hurt her little finger."

Biggles nodded. "I believe you, Mick."

So this was the answer he had come to find. Improbable though it might sound it was by no means impossible. At all events, he could see no weak spot in Mick's story. There was no reason why he should have told him as much as he had, for he would never have suspected it.

He looked the fisherman straight in the eyes, "Have *you* done any smuggling?"

Mick shook his head. "Not that I object to it. It ain't worth the candle these days. In Nat Binns' time it was mostly brandy, brandy and tobacco, cigars chiefly. Where could you sell such things now at a profit to make it worth while? They tell me they're just as dear in France as they are here. If that's right there'd be no market. No, I'm not likely to go into that line o' business."

"That's true enough." Biggles got up. "But I shall have to be getting back to the hotel or I shall miss my tea."

"The police still don't know who killed Vera?"

"They've no proof yet that anybody killed her. So far they haven't been able to find any trace of poison. That was what the police suspected at first. I've just been told that Vera's cat is dead, too. Seems to have died in peculiar circumstances."

"Yes. I heard about that when I went to the shop for some fags. What do you yourself make of it?"

"It's hard to know what to make of it."

"Well, at least I'm sure of one thing," said Mick definitely. "I didn't have anything to do with it." They walked to the entrance together. "Which way are you going?" asked Mick. "Up, or down to the beach?"

"I might as well go up and back to the hotel along the top."

"Mind how you go."

"So long. I'll let you have any news."

"Thanks."

Biggles completed the ascent. Looking down he saw Mick on the beach

and gave him a parting wave. Then he went on his way.

CHAPTER X

LIGHT IN THE DARKNESS

BIGGLES once more found himself on the grassy area that lay between the top of the cliff and the back gardens of the houses on the seaward side of the village street. With no definite object, but wondering if Miss Lewis had gone, he walked over to the hedge. He could see no sign of life so it seemed probable that she had. He walked on to the gale, and having for a minute or two gazed at the deserted garden was about to turn away when a little splash of colour on the rubbish heap caught his eye. He made it out to be a small bunch of red roses. He was sure they had not been there the last time he had looked in.

Opening the gate quietly he went in for a closer look. The roses, he observed, were not full blown; in fact the glossy leaves had not yet withered, and as they lay on the top of the pile it was safe to conclude they had only very recently been thrown there. These, then, were the roses Paul had given to Vera, and had now been thrown out by Miss Lewis in the process of clearing up. Which was natural enough.

Paul had said he had given Vera half a dozen roses. Biggles could count only five. Where was the other one? Looking around he saw it lying a little apart from the rest. Assuming that Miss Lewis would throw down the roses as a bunch, how had that happened? The answer seemed to be provided by a mouse which lay near the solitary rose. Partly mauled and with its coat roughed up it had evidently been killed by a cat. In making its pounce, Biggles reasoned, the cat had interfered with the roses and dragged one of them clear of the rest. It seemed a reasonable explanation. At all events, he could think of no other. Not that he gave the matter any great thought as it seemed of little consequence.

He took a last look at the house. In a way he was sorry Miss Lewis had gone. Not that she could be expected to stay. He would have been glad to have a word with her but there would now be no opportunity. Assuming the Superintendent had been the house would now be locked, so as there was no point in staying he turned away and walked back along the cliff top to the hotel.

Reaching the terrace where he always took his tea he saw at once that something had happened in his absence. Major Payne and his wife were there in close conversation with Captain Gower. The expressions on their faces spoke plainly of tragedy. They looked round sharply at the sound of footsteps.

Major Payne was the first to speak. "Where have you been all the afternoon?"

"Along the beach. Why?"

"You haven't been in the village?"

“No.”

“Then you won’t have heard the news.”

“What news?”

“Miss Lewis has been found dead,” said Gower, succinctly.

To say Biggles was shaken would be to say little. When he had recovered from the shock he said: “Don’t tell me such a thing. Where did this happen?”

Payne answered. “In the same damned house where Vera died.”

Biggles drew a deep breath. “When the Superintendent hears about this he’ll start climbing up the wall.”

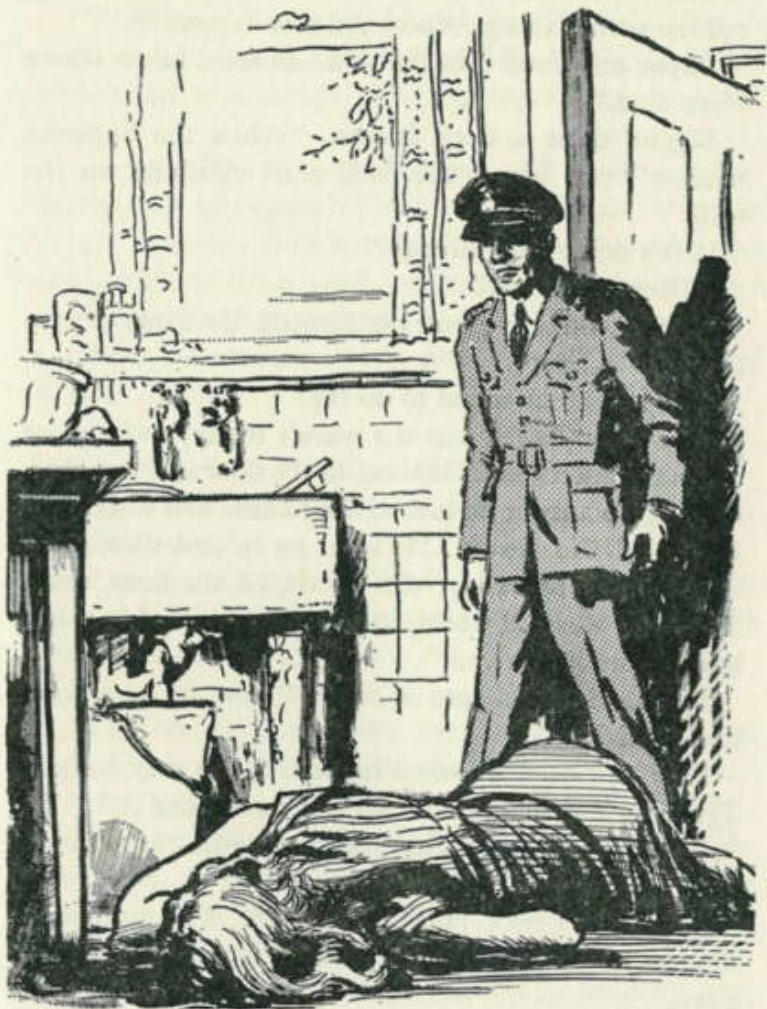
“He’s doing that already.”

“Then he knows.”

“He should. He found her himself. He came over to take her to Truro.”

“I know he intended to do that.”

“He came earlier but she wasn’t ready; so he came again this afternoon. He went to the door and knocked. Getting no answer he turned the handle and walked in. He called. No answer. He went on in and through to the kitchen. There lay Miss Lewis, on the floor, dead. The body was still warm, so it couldn’t have happened long before he arrived.”



There lay Miss Lewis, on the floor, dead

Biggles dropped into a chair. "How do you know about this?"

"He told us. He looked in here on his way back to Truro for a drink. He looked as if he needed it."

"I'll bet he did. In what sort of state was Miss Lewis's body?"

"Same as Vera's. Not a mark on it. The Super told me she looked as if

she'd just lain down and gone to sleep."

"Extraordinary. What else did he say?"

"He asked me where Paul Graveson was."

"Where was he?"

"In his room. He still won't come down. He hasn't been out all day."

"Well, that should put him in the clear. If he hasn't been out he couldn't have killed Miss Lewis. And if he didn't kill Miss Lewis how can anyone say he killed Vera?"

Captain Gower came in again. "Where was Trelawny this afternoon? That's what I'd like to know. I saw him turn back and head for the cove where he keeps his boat. That's right below the Thatched House."

"What are you suggesting?"

"Miss Lewis may have known too much," said Gower darkly.

"So what?"

"It might have suited someone to silence her."

"Such as who?"

"Trelawny."

"I never saw such a man for having an answer for everything," replied Biggles sadly. "No doubt you could find a reason why *I* did it."

Gower did not answer.

"You can take my word for it that Trelawny had nothing whatever to do with the death of Miss Lewis."

"How can you be so positive?"

"For the simple reason I've been with him all the afternoon. We were talking from the time he came ashore until a few minutes ago. I hope that satisfies you. I can see it's lucky for Paul Graveson he didn't go out this afternoon." Biggles turned to Major Payne. "What have they done with the body?"

"Taken it to Truro. I imagine that'll mean another post mortem and another inquest."

"Does Paul know they haven't been able to find cyanide in Vera?"

"Yes. I told him. I imagine that's why he wasn't arrested."

Biggles nodded. "Well, Major, if you don't mind I'd like some tea. It was warm work, walking."

The Paynes went off and Gower followed them, which suited Biggles, who wanted to give his attention to this new development. Jimmy brought his tea but he did not spend long over it. Having finished he moved purposefully. First he went to his room where he emptied the waterproof canvas sponge-bag which when travelling held his shaving kit, spare soap and toothbrush, folded it tightly and put it in a jacket pocket. Then, going down to the yard, and his car, he collected his driving gloves and put them in the other pocket. This done he set off along the top of the cliff, following in reverse the course he had taken an hour earlier. Reaching his objective, after a quick reconnaissance to make sure no one was about, he crossed the strip of grass to the hedge.

Not wanting to be seen, through it he first made a surreptitious survey of Doctor Venner's garden. A smouldering bonfire of dead leaves showed where he had been busy, but the Doctor was not there. Backing away he walked the short distance to the garden of the Thatched House. He didn't expect to see anyone. Nor did he. With blinds drawn already the house wore the melancholy aspect of death. Satisfied with his inspection he turned his eyes to the rubbish dump.

His expression changed abruptly when he perceived that someone had been in the garden within the last hour. Of that there was no doubt, for the discarded roses were no longer there.

For a moment he looked frustrated. He looked again to make sure, thinking perhaps the flowers had faded and in so doing changed to a colour less conspicuous. But there was no mistake. The roses had gone. Then he remembered the mouse and the isolated rose that lay near it.

Opening the gate quietly he went in. The mangled mouse was still there, and near it the single rose. Stooping, without touching it, he examined it closely, and noticed that the stalk was already grey with mildew. He took out the sponge-bag. He put on his gloves. Then, with meticulous care he picked up the rose and dropped it in the receptacle he had brought for the purpose. With a deep breath that might have been relief, after a last quick glance around he withdrew, closing the gate softly behind him.

The purpose of his visit achieved he returned to the hotel by the way he had come, and so to his room, where he put the sponge-bag and its contents in his suitcase, locked it, washed his hands and went down to the telephone call box in the hall.

On the way he met Major Payne. "The very person I wanted to see," he said. "I'm looking for something to read. I think you once mentioned something about Doctor Venner having written a book."

"So he told me."

"A book is always more interesting when you know the author. Do you happen to have a copy of the book?"

"Sorry, no. As a matter of fact I've never seen it. The Doctor happened to mention it to me one day in passing. That was when he first came here. I've some other books..."

"No thanks. It doesn't matter. It was just a notion, having seen the old man."

Biggles went on into the call box.

After a wait of a few minutes he was through to London, where he learned from Ginger, one of his staff, that everything was all right so he could carry on with his rest cure.

"I'd like you to do a little job for me," Biggles told him. "I want you to get me a book. You may have a job to get hold of a copy as it's probably out of print, but you may find a secondhand copy at Foyles or one of the shops in the Charing Cross Road. If you get it put it on the first available passenger train to

Truro, addressed to me care of the Station Master. If you're able to do that phone me here, or wire me, and I'll slip into Truro in the car to collect it. Let me know what train you've put it on. If by any chance I'm not in you can leave a message. Here's the name of the book. Ready? I'm not quite sure of the title but the subject is British Guiana. The author is Doctor Augustus Venner. Okay, that's all. No, I'm not thinking of going there but I have a sudden interest in the country. I'm finding it quite enjoyable down here; there are more things of interest than you might suppose so I shall probably stay on for a bit. So long."

Biggles hung up. Some time later, after dinner in fact, he had the call from the office to say the book was on the night train and would be in Truro early in the morning.

CHAPTER XI

THE BOOK

In the morning, as soon as he had finished breakfast, Biggles went out to his car and set off for Truro to collect the book from the station. It was there. Back in the car he removed the packing to confirm it was the one he wanted. It was. He next went to a stationer's shop where he bought a small reel of transparent adhesive tape and a new sheet of brown paper. With these he made a jacket for the book to prevent anyone who might approach when he was reading it from seeing the title on the front cover. This done he returned to the hotel.

The change of weather Trelawny had forecast as a possibility had not developed and again the day was fine and warm; so, finding a seat in the shade in a corner of the terrace, he settled down to read.

Just before noon he was interrupted by the arrival of Chief Superintendent Smalley.

"So there you are," observed the police officer. "Nice to have nothing to do except sit and read."

Biggles smiled as he closed the book. "I'm on holiday —remember? One can't just sit and do nothing. I've managed to pick up an interesting book. You should read it some time."

"What's it about? One of these clever murders, with clues lying about everywhere?"

"Nothing like it. It's about British Guiana."

"My foot! I'm never likely to go there. I've something better to do."

"It's a fascinating country."

"I'll take your word for it. You'll have heard about Miss Lewis?"

"Of course."

"I found her myself."

"So I'm told."

"That doesn't make things any easier. In fact it only complicates things."

"Where are you bound for now? Were you by any chance looking for me?"

"I happened to be passing and it struck me that you'd be interested to know that we haven't been able to find any trace of poison in anything—the sherry, the chocolates or the strawberries we found in Vera's room. That confirms the report on the body. So we do at least know Vera wasn't poisoned. That goes for Miss Lewis, too, of course."

"And the cat."

"I'm not interested in the cat."

"I think it's a bit early to rule out poison altogether," said Biggles dubiously. "As you know, there are poisons which can kill without affecting the stomach. I mean those that can cause death only by getting into the blood

stream. Some of them can be taken internally with impunity.”

“You mean things like snake venom.”

“Yes.”

The Superintendent looked slightly amused. “Are you pulling that forward as a theory—that these two women died of snake bite?”

“No.”

“I wouldn’t think so, either. I’ve heard there are adders on Bodmin Moor but I’ve never heard tell of one being seen around here.”

“It wouldn’t matter if there were some. An adder bite rarely kills a healthy adult. A child perhaps. Or a person already sick might pass out, the venom of the bite being aggravated by shock. Even that would take time. There’d be no question of the person just dropping dead, as apparently these two women did. By the way, I thought the inquest on Vera was to be today?”

“That was the intention, but in view of what’s happened to Miss Lewis it has been postponed for a couple of days.”

“In your place I’d feel inclined to ask for a postponement longer than that.”

“Oh! And why?”

“Something may come to light. You never know.”

“It’s hard to see what can come to light now. There’s no murder weapon to look for. In fact, there’s damn-all to look for.” The Superintendent spoke helplessly and irritably. “I’ve just been over the ground again and I don’t mind admitting I’m stumped. This business would stump anybody. Not a scrap of evidence to work on.”

Without a flicker of an eyelid Biggles agreed.

The Superintendent became vehement. “Yet I’m as certain as I stand here those two women didn’t die natural deaths. That’s a bit too much of a coincidence. Too much for me, anyhow. But what killed ‘em God alone knows.”

Biggles thought for a moment before he continued. “Listen Chief, I don’t want you to take this the wrong way but I’m going to suggest you do something.”

The Superintendent frowned. “You said you weren’t going to interfere.”

“Nor have I. You can’t say I’ve got in your way. But that doesn’t prevent me from thinking,” Biggles shrugged. “However, please yourself. It isn’t my funeral.”

“Well? What is this big idea?”

“What happened to those gloves that were found in the Thatched House—Paul Graveson’s gloves?”

“They’re in my office.”

“Where in your office?”

“What the hell does it matter? But if you must know they’re in my desk.”

“Is your desk sometimes left open?”

“Yes. Why not?”

“Have you got a safe?”

“Yes.”

“Then what I suggest you do is this. Put the gloves in the safe and keep it locked. But don’t on any account handle them with your bare hands. Either move them with a pair of forceps or put on a pair of gloves, the heavier the better. Leather for choice.”

The Superintendent’s eyes were saucering. “What the devil’s all this?”

“I’ve given you my advice. I’d rather not say any more at present.”

“And what if I don’t take your advice?”

“You may be the next to die a sudden and inexplicable death.”

“For God’s sake! Is this some sort of a joke?”

“Murder and sudden death are not subjects to joke about, Chief. I’m not saying you will die if you handle those gloves. In fact, the chances are a thousand to one you won’t. But you might. You can please yourself about taking the chance.”

The Superintendent’s eyes narrowed. “I’ve got an idea you know more about this business than you’re telling me.”

“Possibly.”

“Then let’s have it.”

“Not now. Later. Tomorrow, perhaps.”

“You can’t withhold evidence from the police. You know that.”

“I haven’t any evidence to withhold. If I had I’d pass it on. But I’m hoping to find some. I’ve learned it can be dangerous to say too much before one is sure of one’s facts.”

“Who have you been talking to?”

“With the exception of you and Major Payne the only people I’ve spoken to have been Paul Graveson and Mick Trelawny.”

“Did you go up to Graveson’s room?”

“No. You would, quite properly, call that interference. He happened to come down for a few minutes and I spoke to him.”

“What about?”

“Just a word of encouragement. I told him if he was innocent he’d nothing to worry about.”

“What about Trelawny?”

“I ran into him on the beach before he did the round of his lobster pots.”

“What did you talk to him about?”

“The ghost. Or rather, shall we say, the alleged ghost.”

“I’ve heard this tale about the Thatched House being haunted. Mrs. Payne told me. She thinks that might have some bearing on the case, holding the view that Vera died from shock.”

“Rubbish.”

“What do you know about this so-called spook—if anything?”

“All I can tell you is, there isn’t one.”

“Who are you to say that? You’re only a visitor here.”

“Do you believe in ghosts?”

"No."

"Then why worry. You can take my word for it there's no spook in the Thatched House, and never was."

"You're probably right; but I'd like to know why you're so damn sure of it."

"Say I don't believe in ghosts, either. Forget it. Don't clutter up your brain with things that don't matter. No ghost had anything to do with the death of Vera Harrington, or Miss Lewis, And you can leave Mick Trelawny out of it. He may look rough and tough but he's as easy to read as a book. There isn't a suspicion of guilt in him. To him, Vera was on a pedestal as high as the Nelson monument."

The Superintendent was looking hard at Biggles. "You must have done a hell of a lot of thinking, if nothing else."

"I have. I couldn't help it."

"Why do you have to worry?"

"I don't. I took an interest primarily because I was sorry for Paul Graveson's parents. They dote on him. If he was charged with Vera's murder it'd be the death of them."

"So what? He hasn't even been arrested."

"No, but when you found that jar of cyanide you were within an ace of popping him in. You thought he'd done it, and not without reason. I took the view that he couldn't have done it."

"*Couldn't!* I like that. Why couldn't he?"

"Became I failed to see how he could have locked and bolted the doors on the inside after he was outside. Put it like this. Miss Lewis said when she came down in the morning she found the doors and windows secured for the night. Am I right?"

"Yes."

"Very well. Had Paul been back into the house after he'd said good night to Vera he would have had to leave something open to get out, even if it was only a window unlatched. He couldn't latch it from the outside—anyway, not without breaking a pane of glass, which would have been noticed. That goes for anyone else, of course. I started with the view, therefore, that nobody could have been in the house when Vera died except the two women."

"I didn't overlook that, of course," asserted the Superintendent.

"Naturally. You wouldn't," returned Biggles, evenly.

"I also took into account the possibility that Paul had planted something in the house before he left."

"I considered that, too. What could he have planted?"

"A poisoned chocolate, for instance."

"Cyanide."

"Yes."

"You say no cyanide has been found in Vera's body, or in the chocolates that had remained uneaten."

"I know that now, but I wasn't to know it early on."

"I take your point. But for Paul to leave a poisoned chocolate seemed most unlikely, unless he was a complete idiot. It presupposes he knew she was going to eat more chocolates before she went to bed."

"She might."

"Very well. Let's say she might. For the sake of argument let's say there was a poisoned chocolate in the box. In that case anyone might have eaten it. As Vera could pick and choose from the box what was to prevent her from eating it while Paul was there, he knowing that if she did so she would at once be taken ill, if, in fact, she didn't drop dead before his eyes. I'm still thinking in terms of cyanide, of course, which acts fast. Would he be such an imbecile as to risk that, knowing what the result would be? That he would instantly be suspect? I couldn't see that. But all this is beside the point because we know now that Vera didn't die of cyanide poisoning. I've merely told you, since you raised the question, why I was pretty sure Paul was innocent at the time you were contemplating his arrest on suspicion of murder. I was relieved to see you didn't do that."

There was a brief silence.

"Look here, Bigglesworth, I'm going to ask you a straight question," said the Superintendent, bluntly.

"I don't like this beating about the bush. You've got something up your sleeve. Honestly, now; do you know who *did* kill Vera Harrington, assuming she was murdered?"

"No. But I have a rough idea. At the moment it's no more than that. If I'm right it may turn out that more than one person had a hand in Vera's death."

"More than one! For God's sake. Isn't one enough?"

"It might have been, but I don't think it was. At present what's in my mind is only surmise. I may know more about it tomorrow—that is, if you don't mind me sticking my neck out."

"I don't care what you do."

"That's fine. If you'll look in here about five o'clock tomorrow afternoon I'll tell you if I'm wrong. If I'm right I'll put my cards on the table on one condition."

"What's that?"

"You keep my name out of it. You're welcome to any credit that may be going. I want no part of it."

"I must say that's mighty generous of you."

"Not at all. Don't forget I'm supposed to be on a rest cure, and if it got to the ears of my Chief that I'd been fiddling with a murder case he might take a dim view of it."

The Superintendent allowed his face to relax in a smile.

"Very well. It's up to you. Let's leave it like that." He got up. "I might as well go back to my office for all the good I'm doing here. I'll look in tomorrow about five. If you can tell me how Vera died, and who killed her,

I'll take my hat off to you. I shall feel like eating it."

Biggles grinned. "Don't do that. You'd find that shiny peak heavy going. Buy me a drink instead. Anyhow, without making any promise I'll do my best to oblige. Don't forget what I said about those gloves."

"I'll think about it."

"Think hard," advised Biggles seriously. "There are enough bodies to be accounted for already, without having yours thrown in."

The Superintendent barked a short, cynical laugh. "I suppose you know what you're talking about, but this sounds like mediaeval stuff to me. I seem to remember reading somewhere of an unpleasant type named Cesare Borgia who had a trick of bumping off people who were in his way by making them a present of a pair of poisoned gloves."

"Somebody has yet to produce evidence that Cesare Borgia ever poisoned anyone," returned Biggles. "That's by the way, but I'm sure he would have been vastly intrigued by the gloves we're talking about."

"Tell me about it sometime. So long." With a parting wave the Superintendent went on his way.

Biggles resumed his reading.

He spent the rest of the day deep in the book, pausing occasionally to digest what he had read.

There were no more shocks, and no one came to interrupt his train of thought.

CHAPTER XII

THE ACCUSING FINGER

The weather remained settled and the following day brought more blue sky and sunshine. The sea lay placid, its whispering to the sand almost inaudible.

Biggles followed his customary routine; the morning dip, a leisurely breakfast and then a stroll along the beach to a secluded niche among the rocks. It was all very pleasant, but his mind was not on the weather or the scenery. He wanted to think. He had an ordeal facing him, a difficult one; one that would almost certainly be embarrassing and possibly painful; and he was anxious to be clear in his mind as to the best way to open the proceedings.

The early excitement over the tragedy that had struck the village appeared to have abated somewhat. The Paynes were again busy in the hotel, and Captain Gower had gone to Truro to do some shopping, to Biggles' relief, for at this juncture he did not want to listen to more of his arbitrary theories.

He had his lunch, took his coffee on the terrace, and at three o'clock by his watch walked slowly up the village street to Dr. Venner's house. Not seeing the Doctor in the garden he went to the front door, which stood wide open, and knocked. It was answered by the Doctor himself, hobbling painfully on his two sticks, his daily woman, as Biggles had anticipated, apparently having gone home. From his expression the old man did not seem too pleased at being disturbed.



*It was answered by the Doctor himself, hobbling painfully
on his two sticks . . .*

“Good afternoon, Doctor,” began Biggles. “I’m staying at the hotel. I wondered if you’d be so kind as to allow me to have a few words with you?”

“What about? I usually rest at this hour.”

“British Guiana. I understand you’ve spent some time in the country and I’d like to ask you a few questions about it.”

“I spent a great many years there. Come in. If we’re going to talk we might as well sit down and make ourselves comfortable.”

Biggles followed the doctor down a short hall into what was evidently his sitting-room although it had more the appearance of a museum, being decorated, in fact partly furnished, with objects of native Indian workmanship. Various pots and bowls, carved wood or earthenware, some crudely painted, stood wherever a place could be found for them. The walls were hung with a wide assortment of weapons, knives, spears, clubs, bows and arrows. A dried head, brown and shrivelled, with its lips sewn together, was suspended from a nail by its hair. There were several snake skins. One, probably that of an anaconda, reached from one side of the room to the other. Above the mantelpiece was a slender eight feet long tube which Biggles recognized as an Indian blowpipe.

“It’s plain you’ve been around, sir,” he said, as he accepted a chair. “I imagine you collected all these souvenirs yourself?”

“I did. Most of my life has been spent in South America, chiefly in the Guianas. For some years I was in the deep forests of British Guiana, medical officer for a timber company that held a concession there.”

“You must have had some unusual cases to deal with.”

“Unusual would hardly describe some of them. I’d say unique. Mostly accidents, of course. Practically all our labour was native. They were mostly Indians of the Maconchi tribe, and to say they were a wild lot would hardly describe them.”

“I’m surprised they were willing to work.”

“They worked for one reason only; to get money to buy drink. On pay day they’d all get drunk, and in that condition they went raving mad and became uncontrollable. It was not uncommon for them to end up slashing at each other with their machetes, or cracking each other’s skulls with clubs, just for the fun of it. One of my jobs was to sew them up. No anaesthetic, but they never flinched. Another job I often had to do was get an arrow out of a man. That’s not easy. You can’t just pull an arrow out, or even cut it out. The only way you can deal with it is to push the arrow right through and cut off the head, when the shaft can be withdrawn. If there was a vital organ in the way it was just too bad. There was nothing one could do about it and the man died. His friends didn’t care. Still, I’ve known men make astonishing recoveries. I got one man on his feet after his skull had been split open with an axe.”

“These arrows couldn’t have been poisoned, then?”

“No. They used poison for hunting, though. Practically all Central and South American Indians make poison of one sort or another for tipping the darts they use in their blowpipes. In Equador it’s *curare*, which I’ve seen made by thrusting at a venomous snake a lump of rotten liver on the end of a stick. When the liver becomes impregnated it undergoes some tribal rites and

it's ready for use."

"I've heard of *curare*. Your Indians didn't have it?"

"No. The Maconchi concocted an even more deadly potion called *Wourali*. That also contains snake venom. The poison glands of the *counaconchi*, sometimes called the bushmaster on account of the deadliness of its bite, are mashed with various poisonous plants, notably the *wourali* vine, from which the stuff gets its name. One scratch with that is enough."

"I'm surprised the Indians dare handle it."

"Once in a while some silly fool would accidentally prick himself with one of his own darts. From familiarity they became careless with them so that was only to be expected. I actually saw a man do that one day. He realized what he'd done and knew there was nothing he or I could do about it. He gave up all hope of life but took it quite calmly."

"What exactly happened?"

"For about two minutes he remained standing, his body becoming rigid, his eyes glazing. Then he sank down. Another minute he was flat on his back. In that position he went into a coma, but his heart was still just beating. By the fifth minute, by my watch, after a slight spasm, he was dead. He died without a sound and as far as I could judge, without pain. One would think he'd just lain down and dropped off to sleep."

"A nasty experience. You were never able to find an antidote?"

"No, and I doubt very much if one ever will be found. The action of the stuff is too swift, much faster than any snake bite. Once a spot of the affected blood touches the heart it's all over. It appears to paralyse the muscles and that's the end. It has no effect taken in the stomach, so a bird or animal that has been killed by a *wourali* dart can be eaten without any harmful effect. That's the whole idea, of course. An Indian can't afford to waste time hunting for fun. It's always food he's after."

"You must have carried out quite a few experiments with *wourali*."

"I did. All I learned was, the larger the animal the longer it took to die. As a medical man I was naturally interested in the possible uses of the stuff in medicine. Quite a number of native Indian concoctions have been found to have curative properties if properly used. Quinine, for instance, a product of the cinchona tree, was once the only known specific for fever. It's still used. Ipecacuanha, once a popular emetic, is the root of a Brazilian violet. Sarsaparilla is a derivative of a flower of the smilax family. Angostura, from the bark of a tree that grows wild in Venezuela, originally a powerful tonic, is now used chiefly to give a bitter principle to gin. Hence gin and angostura."

"I believe the largest animal you experimented on was a cow. It took seven minutes to die, although it was unconscious before that."

"How do you know?" The Doctor spoke sharply.

"I've just read your book."

"Ah. Now I understand."

"You say *wourali* leaves no trace?"

“None whatever.”

“What does it look like?”

“It’s practically colourless, but when exposed to damp it appears as a grey mildew.” The Doctor’s eyes were now on Biggles’ face.

“I have an idea you brought some of this stuff home with you,” went on Biggles, evenly.

After a brittle silence that must have lasted for a good five seconds the Doctor said softly: “So that’s why you came here.”

“It is.”

“So you know.” The Doctor breathed the words. The colour had left his face and there was a curious gleam in his eyes.

“I know now,” returned Biggles dispassionately.

“Who are you?”

“At the moment I’m a casual visitor on holiday at the hotel.”

The Doctor drew a deep breath. “All right. I won’t deny it.”

“Why did you do it?”

“Do what?”

“Dress the stalks and thorns of your roses with *wourali*.”

“I brought home a small quantity to continue my experiments. The thought occurred to me to try the effect of the stuff on greenfly.”

“Why use such deadly stuff as *wourali* to kill flies when there are plenty of cheap and efficient insecticides on the market? Come, Doctor, you can’t seriously expect me to believe that.”

The Doctor suddenly blazed into passion. “Very well. I admit it, I did use it for a different purpose. I had a good reason. For years just before the Flower Show my best roses, those I had cultivated specially for exhibition, have been stolen. As if that were not enough the thieves had the infernal audacity to exhibit them as their own, and I had the mortification of seeing them carry off the prizes.”

“You could have complained to the committee.”

“What was the use of that? I did, but I had no proof. I had the whole village against me because I was a stranger. All that did was make me hated, victimized by lying propaganda put about by the guilty party. I decided to leach the thief a lesson.”

“I’d hardly call killing someone a lesson.”

“I had no intention of killing anyone.”

“Then what did you intend?”

“The poison was old stuff and I imagined it would have lost most of its potency; instead of which, by evaporation, it must have become more concentrated. I thought it might give the thief a sore finger, possibly a brief period of nausea or a headache, but nothing worse than that.”

“After the experiments you describe so vividly in your book you must have known it was a dangerous thing to do.”

“What else could I do? I’m too old and infirm to sit up all night guarding

my roses. And why should I? It was the only way I could think of to catch the thief."

Biggles continued relentlessly. "You knew perfectly well that if there was a serious accident as a result of what you'd done the Flower Show which you hated might have to be abandoned—as in fact it has been. Wasn't that how you intended to get your own back?"

"Nothing of the sort. No such thought occurred to me."

"I suggest that to have been able to stop the Show must have afforded you considerable satisfaction."

"That isn't true."

"Had those roses gone to the show, as you expected, you might have killed half a dozen people, judges and others, who had nothing whatever to do with the theft. As it is you've killed two innocent women."

"How could I have imagined that a charming girl like Vera Harrington would stoop so low as to steal flowers from an old man's garden?"

"She didn't. Someone else took the roses and gave them to her."

"Then why wasn't that person affected?"

"That's the irony of it. He took the precaution to wear gloves in order not to prick his fingers in the dark. You must have realized what had happened when you discovered some of your roses had disappeared and Vera Harrington had been found dead."

"I suspected it."

"You knew it."

"I was shocked."

"Why didn't you tell the police at once what you'd done?"

"That wouldn't have saved Vera."

"It would have saved Miss Lewis. In failing to report the facts to Superintendent Smalley you were directly responsible for her death."

"I realize now I should have done that, but I admit frankly I shrank from the ordeal. I haven't much longer to live and I couldn't face the publicity."

"I hope you're able to face having the deaths of those two unfortunate women on your conscience for the rest of your days," returned Biggles grimly.

"I did consider going to the police."

"You didn't even give it a thought. All you were concerned with was yourself."

"How can you say that?"

"How can I say it? Not only did you fail to go to the police but you were cowardly enough to try to throw suspicion on someone else."

"Who?"

"Trelawny."

"I saw him go to the house in the middle of the night."

"Yes, and you weren't long letting the police know about that, although you knew perfectly well that he had nothing to do with Vera's death because

you yourself were guilty.”

“He might have been the thief who stole my roses for all I knew.”

“And for that you were prepared to see him arrested on a charge of murder. That was the idea, wasn’t it?”

The Doctor did not answer.

Biggles went on remorselessly. “Still trying to protect yourself at the expense and perhaps the lives of other people the next thing you did was go into the garden next door and remove the proof of what you’d done. You took away the roses which you knew would be thrown out before the house was closed. Or perhaps you saw Miss Lewis do it. You were prepared to let that harmless old woman do that although you must have known she wasn’t the thief who took your roses. What did you do with them—burn them?”

“Yes. They can do no more harm.”

“That’s what I thought. I saw the bonfire. I believe I’m right in saying you also sprayed the rose trees in your own garden to remove any poison that remained on them.”

“I sprayed them with water. The stuff is soluble in water. I didn’t want any more accidents.”

“I’ll bet you didn’t. What you mean is, you were taking good care the accident didn’t happen to you,” asserted Biggles, with caustic sarcasm. “From first to last, all you’ve thought about is yourself, pandering to your own miserable spite, regardless of what happened to other people.”

There was another short silence. The Doctor’s face was ashen. “What do you intend to do about it?” he asked, dully.

“I shall do what you should have done in the first place—inform the police,” answered Biggles, frostily.

“Then they don’t know—what you know?”

“Not yet. But they soon will.”

“You can’t prove a thing.”

“Don’t hang any hopes on that. When you were so careful to remove the poisoned roses from the garden next door, to destroy the evidence of what you’d done, you overlooked one. It was the one that killed Vera’s cat and it lay apart from the others. I have it in my room at the hotel. The poison is still on it.”

The Doctor’s breath was coming fast. “Don’t tell the police,” he pleaded.

“I shall tell Superintendent Smalley. These deaths must be accounted for and by your silence he’s been put to enough trouble already.”

“I assure you it was all an accident. I swear I had no intention of killing anyone.”

“You’ll have to try to convince a judge and jury of that but I doubt if you’ll succeed. You did a damnable thing and you know it.”

“Had I wanted to murder anyone it would have been the easiest thing in the world. I could have used this.” The Doctor got up and unhooked the blowpipe from the wall. “I’ll show you how it works. It’s quite simple.”

He raised the mouthpiece to his lips. Then, in a flash, he had swung the tube round to point at the face of his accuser.

Biggles ducked. At the same time he flung up an arm and dashed the blowpipe from the Doctor's hands, but not before there was a soft sound like *phut* behind him. Snatching up the weapon he broke it across his knee.

The Doctor fell back in his chair, white, and shaking as though with ague. His eyes glared. His lips moved, but no sound came from them.

For a second Biggles stared at him, pale and tight-lipped. "You wicked old man," he rasped. "When I came here I thought you were nothing worse than vicious; but now I know you for what you really are— a cold-blooded murderer."

With that he strode out of the house and on down the street towards the hotel.

CHAPTER XIII

BIGGLES EXPLAINS

BIGGLES arrived at the hotel to find the Superintendent, with his driver, on the terrace waiting for him. Also present were Major Payne, and Captain Gower back from Truro.

Biggles did not speak, but dropped into a chair and mopped a damp face with his handkerchief; for not only was the sun hot, but the last hour had been a greater strain than he had expected.

He was regarded by three expectant faces.

The Superintendent spoke first. "Well," he inquired lightly. "Are you going to tell us who killed Vera Harrington?"

Biggles took out his cigarette case with hands that were still not quite steady. "Yes, I can do that now. I've just been talking to the murderer."

"Who was it?"

"Doctor Venner."

"What! That doddering old man? What are you trying to give me?"

"I'm telling you, believe it or not, that Venner was the devil responsible for the deaths of Vera and Miss Lewis. Admittedly, he wasn't sure who he was going to kill so it's hardly surprising you couldn't find a motive. And it certainly wasn't one you'd be looking for. But it was there, make no mistake about that. A few minutes ago he tried to kill me in much the same way, so if I hadn't been a bit too quick for him you'd have had another body on your hands."

In the silence that followed Biggles lit a cigarette.

"You realize what you're saying? Are you quite sure about this?" asked the Superintendent, incredulously.

"Quite sure."

"You can't be serious," remonstrated Major Payne. "That nice old boy, and a cripple into the bargain. It's preposterous!"

"If what happened to me a few minutes ago had happened to you, you'd have thought it serious enough. I've had some close shaves in my time but I've never been nearer to Old Man Death. That kindly old gentleman, as you take him to be, is about as gentle as a tiger that's just had its tail twisted."

The Superintendent stepped in again. "But why in the name of heaven would he want to kill anyone?"

"You'd be surprised. Don't stand up. Sit down and I'll tell you all about it. His motive had its roots in the Flower Show."

"Are you asking us to believe that a man, any man, would commit murder on account of a village flower show?"

"I'm not asking you to believe anything. I'm telling you that Vera and Miss Lewis, and the cat, were killed by a deadly South American blood

poison called *wourali*. A prick, or a scratch, is enough. Death follows in a matter of seconds.”

“How the devil did you know about that? How did you come to suspect it?”

The Doctor told me.”

“He told you!”

“Not intentionally. I got the information from reading his book on his experiences in British Guiana. You saw me reading it. I told you you’d find it enlightening if you’d trouble to glance through it. When a man writes a factual book he usually dwells at some length on the subject that is of greatest interest to him. With Venner the subject was poisons, native Indian poisons; in particular a hellish brew called *wourali*. It seemed to fascinate him. He had plenty of opportunities for experiments and studying its action. In his book he had a lot to say about that.”

“But how did he use it, and why? We could find no trace of poison.”

“For the simple reason that the amount required to cause death is so small that it doesn’t leave any trace— although, as a matter of fact, you told me there were indications suggestive of poison. But the doctors wouldn’t be looking for anything like *wourali*. It’s unlikely they’d know anything about it and it wouldn’t have made any difference if they had.”

“Tell me; what exactly happened?”

“The sequence of events, as I see them now, must have been something like this. As Payne knows, and told me, Venner has a bug in his brain about the Flower Show. He claims his best roses were always stolen just before the day. He saw them at the Show. Saw them win prizes. That made him mad. This year, deciding to teach the thief a lesson, he anointed the stalks and thorns of his best roses with this damnable stuff *wourali*.”

“What a dastardly thing to do. Are you quite certain of this?”

“I’ve just had it out with him. He admitted it.” Biggles smiled faintly at the expression on Captain Gower’s face.

“So that’s where you’ve been all the afternoon.”

“Yes. We had a lot to talk about and I had to take my fences carefully, one at a time, to prevent him from guessing what I was leading up to. But let me go on. On the afternoon of the night Vera died Paul Graveson went to Truro. He promised to bring Vera some roses—”

“Which we know he did.”

“Yes, but he didn’t buy those roses in Truro—or anywhere else.”

“He said he did.”

“I know. But he was lying because he was afraid to tell the truth. He went to Truro but forgot all about the roses. Rather than disappoint the girl, or have to admit he’d forgotten his promise, he had the nerve to pinch some roses from the Doctor’s garden. Naturally, he chose the best blooms, which were of course the very ones that had been treated with poison.”

“Then why wasn’t *he* killed?”

“Because knowing what he was going to do, although not by the wildest stretch of imagination could he have suspected the roses were a death trap, he wore his leather driving gloves to protect his fingers from the thorns. My God! He little knows how lucky he was. Now you know why I warned you to be careful how you bundled those gloves. There was a remote chance that a thorn had been left in one of them, and had you pricked your hand on it yours would have been the next mysterious death.”

“Thanks. But how did you know he’d pinched the roses?”

“He told me.”

“He didn’t tell me.”

“I wouldn’t expect him to, although he couldn’t have had the slightest suspicion that those roses were the direct cause of Vera’s death.”

“Why did he tell you?”

“I forced it out of him. I knew he was lying, and told him so.”

“How did you know? Did you go to see him?”

“No, but I told you I’d seen him. It was in the yard, quite by chance, I heard him getting his car out.”

“To do what? Run away?”

“Yes.”

“The young devil, I told him to stay here.”

“I wouldn’t lay too much stress on that. To be suspected of murder knowing oneself to be innocent is enough to make anyone panic. That’s the state he was in. I persuaded him not to do anything so silly. If he was innocent we should be able to find a way to prove it. The upshot was we sat in the car and had a chat. There were a couple of weak spots in his statement and I tackled him on them.”

“What were they?”

“First, the gloves he’d left in Vera’s sitting-room. It was a hot night. I asked him why he had put them on. He said it was to protect his hands from the thorns on the roses. I let that pass although I wasn’t entirely convinced, because wherever he’d bought the roses the stalks at least would have been given some sort of protective covering. No one could be expected to carry a bunch of roses in the bare hand.”

“I see that. I didn’t know about him pinching the roses.”

“Of course not. That was where I had the advantage of you. But it was the second question he found harder to answer, and I broke him down on it. Then it answered both my questions. It was the time factor. The times of Paul’s movements that night tied up well enough in every statement, his own, that of Miss Lewis, and his parents. They all agreed. But there was a flaw. You will remember he left here to go to Vera at nine-thirty. Payne here confirmed that. He arrived at ten. Miss Lewis confirmed that. Paul says he left Vera at ten-thirty and his parents stated he was back in the hotel at ten-forty.”

“That fitted like a jigsaw.”

“It fitted too well for Paul. If it hadn’t he might have got away with it. Why

had it taken him half an hour to walk to the Thatched House yet only ten minutes to walk back? I put it to him. At first he tried to explain it by saying the going was uphill. I wouldn't accept that. I told him he was lying. Then the truth came out and it answered the question as to why he wore gloves."

"He'd been into the garden next door and pinched some of the Doctor's roses."

"Exactly. Naturally, being ashamed of it, he didn't want that to be known. Now let's move on a bit further. He went into the house still carrying the roses in a gloved hand and laid them on the table with the chocolates. They weren't touched again while he was there. Had they been moved the situation might have been very different. Paul would have taken his gloves off, so had he been the one to prick his finger—but that didn't happen so we needn't talk about it. He stayed half an hour, When he left he forgot the gloves, no doubt because he no longer had any need of them.

"Now let's go back a bit. Thinking things over I had decided there must be something in that house capable of causing death. Moreover, it could have been introduced only recently. What was it? I went over everything that had been taken in during the twenty-four hours prior to Vera's death. You told me, Chief, that everything had been checked and cleared by analysis. One item only hadn't been mentioned. The roses. Nobody had looked twice at them. That was understandable. People don't eat roses. Paul had confessed to me where the roses came from. Vera's last words to Paul were to the effect that she'd put the roses in water before going to bed. They must have been literally her last words. Again, you'll notice, we come back to those roses. It was roses, roses, all the way. It was hard to see how they could have had anything to do with what happened, but by this time I was getting suspicious of that bunch of flowers. Absurd as it seemed I couldn't escape the conclusion that in some way they came into the picture."

"Go on, I'm with you."

"There was now a glimmer of light. The roses had come from the Doctor's garden. He was at loggerheads with the village over the Flower Show. He had spent most of his life in British Guiana where as a medical man he would certainly come into contact with native poisons. I've been there too, and know a little about them. But let's go back to Vera. We know that she started to do what she said she was going to do, put the roses in water. She fetched a vase and put some of the roses in it. But not all. Why didn't she finish the job while she was at it? It's easy now to see the reason. She'd run a poisoned thorn into one of her fingers. The rest is surmise. Why she went upstairs I can't tell you. She may have felt faint, or sick, and went up to her room for some sort of medicine. She may have intended to call Miss Lewis. We don't know and we shall never know. The reason is not important. The fact is, when she went upstairs she obviously expected to come down again or she would have put the sitting-room light out. We know why she didn't. Apparently nobody else touched those flowers until Miss Lewis, in a final clear up, threw them on the

rubbish heap at the end of the garden. She must have pricked or scratched a finger and that was it.”

“What about the cat?”

“It may have followed her to the rubbish heap, in which case it’s a question of which of them died first, Miss Lewis or the cat. Miss Lewis managed to get back to the house, where, like Vera in her bedroom, she collapsed on the kitchen floor and died. The cat, which must have stepped on one of those same thorns—I’ll come back to this presently—walked as far as the road where Gower saw it die. No doubt it would have gone into the house had the door been open, in which case both bodies would have been found together. As it was, the cat was found first. Miss Lewis was already dead or dying but her body wasn’t discovered until you went the second time to call for her.”

“I told her not to allow anyone in the house.”

“Certainly nobody could have gone in or her body would have been found before it was.”

“What gave you the idea the cat had stepped on one of those damned thorns?”

“I only realized that when it hooked up with something I’d seen.”

“Where?”

“In Vera’s garden, on the rubbish heap. Looking over the back gate I saw the roses lying there. I counted six, which was the number Paul told me he had taken. With one exception they were lying in a bunch, as one would expect. The odd one was lying a little distance away looking as if it had been dragged. Near it was a dead mouse, somewhat mutilated. The cat must have pounced on the mouse, possibly at the time Miss Lewis was at the dump, and in so doing had landed on a thorn. It walked to the road and died. It’s unlikely Venner knew about that. He may not have been certain how many roses had been stolen, but he appears to have been satisfied with five.”

“What do you mean? I don’t get it.”

“When I felt sure of my ground I slipped back to collect those roses; but I was too late; they’d gone.”

“You mean they’d been taken away?”

“Exactly that.”

“By whom?”

“Venner, who else? He’d burnt them. I saw the bonfire still smoking in his garden. But he hadn’t noticed the one lying by itself. It’s upstairs in my sponge-bag. Take it with you but be careful how you handle it. What looks like grey mouldy stuff on the stalk is the poison. It shows when it’s damp. I learned that from Venner.”

“He told you?”

“Yes, but I already knew it. You see, from whichever angle I looked I couldn’t get away from those roses, so I decided it was time to check up on Venner. I phoned my London office and asked to be sent a copy of his book. You saw me reading it. It told me all I wanted to know. He had dabbled in

native poisons for years. There was a whole chapter on how they're made and another about their effect on humans, as well as birds and animals. He'd seen an Indian die from a scratch by one of his own darts and described the process to the last detail. I could see Vera dying the same way. Feeling I was now right on the beam I decided to have a few words with the old man. I've just left him."

"Did he admit it?"

"Not at once. But it didn't take him long, from the questions I asked, to guess that I knew what he'd done. I told him I'd read his book."

"How did he take it?"

"Pretty well, I thought, at first. He was full of excuses of course. He hadn't intended to kill anyone. Perhaps make someone feel a bit queer."

"But he must have known damn well that he'd been responsible for Vera's death."

"Of course he did. The fact that some of his prize blooms had disappeared would tell him that. He thought, not unnaturally, that it was Vera herself who had been in his garden and pinched them."

"Why didn't he tell me?"

"I asked him that. His excuse was he was a sick old man and couldn't face the publicity. I pointed out that it didn't prevent him from going out of his way to try to throw the guilt on Trelawny."

"He didn't mind admitting all this to you knowing you'd tell me?"

"He was hoping to be able to prevent that, and he nearly succeeded. His sitting-room is full of souvenirs, with a nice assortment of native weapons. One of these is a blowpipe for shooting darts tipped with the same hellish stuff that killed Vera and Miss Lewis. Saying that he could easily have committed murder had he wanted to, he took it off the wall to show me. But for a look in his eye he might have caught me. In one flick of a lamb's tail it was pointing at me. I ducked just in time. The dart must have missed me by inches. It hit the wall."

"The damned old villain. What did you do?"

"I snatched the blowpipe out of his hands and smashed it. There was no accident about that. He deliberately tried to kill me. I realized afterwards that he'd had that in mind from the moment he knew I knew and that nothing would stop me from telling you. You should have seen his face. He looked like a cornered wild beast. I told him what I thought of him and came away. That's about all. He's all yours. And now, Payne, if you'll pass the word to Jimmy I'll have my tea. I can do with it, and I feel I've earned it."

"It's time I had a word with this precious doctor myself," said the Superintendent grimly.

"Be careful. He's good enough, or bad enough, for anything."

"I'll watch it," stated the Superintendent, trenchantly. "Come on, Smith. We might as well take the car. It's too hot for walking, and the sooner we see this old devil before he gets into more mischief the better."

The car went off with the Sergeant at the wheel.

Biggles was buttering a scone when, within ten minutes, to his surprise the car came back.

"That didn't take long," he observed.

"There was nothing for us to do except lock the house until I can get the photographers here."

Biggles looked up, understanding in his eyes. "Ah! So it's like that."

"Killed himself with one of his darts. Made certain of it, too. Stuck it in the artery of his wrist."

Biggles shrugged. "Well, it seems he was right in not being able to face publicity. Best thing he could have done. Saves him, and you, a lot of trouble. I shan't saturate my pillow with tears over him. You might tell young Graveson he's in the clear."

"I'll leave you to do that. You going to stay on here for a bit?"

"I hope so. I can now get on with what I was sent here to do."

"And what's that?"

"Sit on the beach and count the waves coming in, the idea being to give my nerves a rest and my brain a refresher course."

"It seems to have worked." The Superintendent hung back for a moment. "You're sure you don't want your name mentioned in connexion with this affair?"

"Quite sure, thank you."

"As you wish. But I must give you this. It may be, after all, that you fellows at the Yard are a bit smarter than we are."

Biggles waved the suggestion aside. "Nonsense, Chief. It's just a matter of how these things work out. I've no doubt that in your own line of country you could teach us a thing or two."

"I hope one day we may have an opportunity to prove that. I'll be seeing you again before you go. So long for now."

The Superintendent walked away.

Captain Gower was staring at Biggles with an extraordinary look in his eyes. "What Yard's he talking about?" he asked, jerking a thumb at the departing police car.

"Scotland Yard."

"Well, blow the man down! Is that where you work?"

"That's my headquarters," acknowledged Biggles, smiling at Gower's expression.

"A detective, eh?"

"Sort of."

"And the Super knew that?"

"Of course."

"Now I get it. That's why he's done so much nattering with you."

"Could be."

"And you had me fooled all along," accused the sailor. "This is where my

faith in human nature ends. Why the hell didn't you tell me?"

"And spoil your fun? After all, you're the thriller expert, I thought you'd enjoy having a go at the real thing."

Gower's face broke into a smile. He reverted to his usual breezy manner. "Fair enough. What a story I shall have to tell! Real life stuff."

"As you say, what a story," agreed Biggles. "Sit down and have some tea; but let's have no more talk of murder and sudden death. I have enough of that when I'm at home."

THE END